

Loudmouth by DBSean

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Summary: Boy meets girl. Boy falls for girl. Boy gets his ass kicked on the very first day of high school. Not necessarily in that order. The High School AU Mileven story absolutely nobody asked for.

1. Mike Gets His Ass Kicked

"Loudmouth"

A/N: My very first attempt at an AU tale. I may or may not flesh this out into a longer story; for now, though, it's just a really long oneshot. Let me know what you think!

Rated for language. Mike's a bit of a potty-mouth in this. You'll see.

Tuesday, September 3rd, 1985.

Fourteen-year-old Mike Wheeler's first day at Hawkins High School had officially come to an end. Now a freshman, having 'graduated' from Hawkins Middle the previous June, Mike had hoped high school would represent a fresh start for him. A chance to escape the teasing and torment he had endured all through middle school. A chance to come out of his shell, to develop new interests, to finally let himself be the person he so desperately wanted to be. Maybe even a chance to make a friend or two?

Yes, for all intents and purposes, Mike Wheeler had hoped high school would be different. And so it was to his great regret that the first day of his high school career was ending in almost the exact same way every day of his middle school career had ended.

Namely, with him getting his ass kicked by Troy Peyton.

Mike cursed hoarsely as he felt Troy's fist make contact with his face for what had to be at least the fifth time since their 'fight' began. Though it was a little unfair to call it a fight, he realized, considering his contribution to the conflict consisted almost entirely of grunting, cursing, and flailing around spastically. His nose was already a pulpy mess, with blood staining his face, hiding his usually prominent freckles and even getting caught in some of his unruly black hair.

'Please just let him go easy on me today,' Mike thought to himself as he stumbled backwards and tried to look through an eye he was sure was already turning black. *'Come on, God, please, no permanent*

damage. Give me that at least.'

Troy's next punch caught him right in the mouth, and dislodged a tooth.

'OH, SCREW YOU, GOD!'

The school day had come to an end only twenty minutes before and, for a second, Mike had actually thought he was going to make it off school property bodily intact. He had had a good day, all things considered: his classes didn't seem too difficult, he liked most of his teachers, and he had only been spit on by four or five people. For a second there, he really thought he was going to get the fresh start he had been hoping for all these years.

Cue Troy cornering him in the grassy lot by the parking lot. Mike had been Troy's favorite target for all of middle school, his own personal punching bag, and Mike had been *hoping* high school would be different. Unfortunately, this had proven not to be the case.

"God-fucking-damnit!" Mike groaned loudly as he lifted a hand up to his now-bloodied mouth. "You knocked out a tooth! I literally *just* went to the dentist's office yesterday, Troy! Yesterday! Now I gotta go back."

Troy only smirked, tossing aside some of his greasy hair and cracking his neck in preparation to go after Mike again.

"Serves you right, Wheeler," he said with an ugly sneer. "Can't have you thinking I'm gonna go easy on you just because –"

"Oh, wait, never mind," Mike interrupted as he pulled out the dislocated tooth and looked at it in the afternoon light. "Holy shit, I think it's a wisdom tooth! You might have actually *saved* me a trip to the dentist!"

"Shut up, already!"

Troy's next punch caught Mike in his stomach, and his eyes widened as he felt all of the air suddenly burst out of his lungs all at once.

"You just don't get it, do you, Wheeler?" Troy asked as he watched

Mike crumple to his knees, both arms now wrapping around his stomach as he attempted to catch his breath. "You wanna know why I do this? You wanna know why I gotta beat the crap out of you every single day? Huh?"

"Shit, man, I dunno," Mike gasped as he looked up at Troy from his half-crouching position on the ground. "Cuz you peaked in sixth grade and it's been nothing but downhill for you ever since?"

"Nah," Troy answered as he kneed Mike in the face, causing him to cry out and crumple to the ground once again. "It's because you don't know when to *shut your fucking mouth!*"

'*Fair enough,*' Mike considered.

"Well, fuck, Troy...why didn't you tell me earlier?" he said slowly, still gasping for air and doing his level best to keep himself from falling over entirely. He was on all fours now and didn't even have the strength necessary to lift his head up to look at Troy.

"I mean...we could have come up with a signal or something, you know?" he went on, a macabre grin forming on his face, despite how painful it was to smile. "That way, next time I'm mouthing off, you just pull your ear or flash some jazz hands or something, and I'll be like 'oh, shit, I better shut my goddamn pie-hole before Troy has to come over and kick the shit outta me!' Think of all the beatings we could have saved!"

"Smartass," Troy muttered before giving Mike one last kick to the ribs, effectively sending the young man sprawling onto the ground. "Always gotta have the last laugh, don't ya?"

'*Worth it,*' thought Mike, before wincing in pain because at this point it literally *hurt to think*.

"Screw this, I got syllabus signatures to forge," Troy said as he picked his backpack up off the ground and began heading towards the parking lot, but not before taking the time to spit on the back of Mike's head. "Catch you tomorrow, Wheeler. Same time, same place."

"It's a date!" Mike responded, though it came out as little more than

'es a ate!' due to the fact that he was still lying facedown in a puddle of mud and blood.

Mike took a moment to watch out of the corner of his eye as Troy strutted into the parking lot, quickly disappearing amongst the other three hundred or so students making their way to their buses or cars or bikes. From his (less than stellar) position in the dirt and grime, Mike could make out at least three staff members directly in his line of sight, as well as several other students from a variety of grades.

"So...anyone gonna help me?" he tried asking, looking around as his fellow students continued to walk past without so much as stopping to look. "Freshman bleeding into the ground? No? Nothing to that? Just gonna keep walking?"

Mike sighed. Unfortunately, he was used to being ignored. Truth be told, he sometimes preferred it, as being ignored meant no one was calling him names or rearranging his organs with their fists. Still, a little help would have been nice.

'So much for high school,' he thought to himself as he slowly and painfully rolled himself over so he was at least facing upwards and no longer breathing in dirt and grass. *'But hey, look on the bright side, Wheeler: only four more years to college! I wonder what it will be like to get my ass kicked on a university campus?'*

He tried to look up at the blue sky above him, but found it difficult with one of his eyes almost swollen shut from the force of Troy's punches. He knew it was about time he stood up, brushed himself off, and hobbled home as best he could, but he just couldn't seem to bring himself to do it. He couldn't seem to bring himself to do much of *anything*, really.

It had been like this ever since Mike's family moved to Hawkins in 1982, just after he had finished fifth grade. Back in elementary school, back in Montauk, he'd had friends. Will Byers. Lucas Sinclair. Dustin Henderson. Max Mayfield. The Party. He'd had support, people who cared for him, people he could be himself around.

Now? Not so much. It seemed the moment the Wheeler family had moved to Hawkins, Mike began walking through life as though he

had a target painted on the back of his head. No more friends. No more support. No more life.

And why? Because he would rather read a book than play football? Because he actually enjoyed completing his schoolwork? Because, as much as he longed to have another friend, a true friend, someone he could share himself and his interests with, he nonetheless preferred to be alone most of the time, when it came right down to it?

It's not like he was a bad person. He did all of his homework and turned all of his assignments in on time. He tutored his little sister Holly and helped his mother cook dinner and clean the dishes. Hell, he was a Boy Scout, for crying out loud; he sold popcorn for charity and helped little old ladies cross the street. So what had he done to deserve this?

Troy had said his mouth was the problem, but Mike knew that wasn't it; his mouth was the *effect* of his torment, not the *cause*. It was his way of coping with the tragedy that was his social life, of working past the teasing and the beatings. It was his way of getting back at his tormentors.

At least, that's what he told himself.

"Remember, Mike, there are only two ways to go through life," Ted Wheeler had told his son upon watching him arrive home with a black eye for the very first time. "You can either laugh, or you can cry. And men – real men – don't cry. So what are you gonna do?"

I'm gonna laugh, Mike had realized that day. My life is just one big joke anyway; I might as well have fun with it.

"Are you okay?"

Mike was finally brought out of his mournful ruminations by a voice he had never heard before. Groaning slightly, he opened his one good eye and strained to get a good look at the person now looking down at him, their voice full of worry.

When he did, he felt his breath catch in his throat.

Standing above him, and looking down with what appeared to be a

genuine look of concern on her face, was a girl. But not just any girl. It was a girl Mike had never met before, had never *seen* before, had no idea even *existed* before this very moment.

She wore what appeared to be a pair of faded jeans and a relatively baggy sweater, finishing the ensemble with a well-loved pair of Chucks. Her skin was fair, and almost as pale as his own, a telltale sign she didn't get much sun, and her hair was short and brown and unruly, falling all about her scalp in a beautiful burst of curls.

And her eyes. Holy hell, her eyes.

Her eyes were a bright brown in color, almost hazel, the color of chestnuts and autumn leaves and bonfires. They were wide with worry, worry for him – for *him* of all people – and piercing in their intensity, as though they could see past the blood and the grime and the exhaustion and straight into his very soul.

Anyone else might have looked right past her without a second thought, seeing just another girl among the hundreds Hawkins High had to offer. But not Mike. As far as Mike was concerned, she was the most beautiful girl in the world.

"Pretty," he mumbled.

That caused the girl's eyes to widen even further, if it was possible, and Mike silently cursed himself as he watched her face turn red; he hadn't realized he had said that out loud. Once again, his mouth was getting him into trouble.

"Me?" she asked, blinking inquisitively. "You think I'm...pretty?"

"Uh-huh," Mike admitted before he could stop himself. "Are you an angel?"

'*Jesus Christ, Wheeler, you total wastoid.*'

"I don't think so."

"Damn," Mike groaned as he squeezed his eyes shut and finally made to sit up. "Means I'm still alive, then."

He had barely even managed to lift his head off the ground before the girl was kneeling beside him and hesitantly helping him sit up with hands that he noticed were shaking slightly, as if she wasn't sure what to do or how to help. With her assistance, however, he managed to at least lift himself into a sitting position.

"Thanks," Mike said with a gasp as he placed a hand over his swollen eye, checking to see whether it was really as bad as he thought it was. (It was).

"What happened?" the girl asked, her eyes still wide as she looked him over. "You're...hurt."

She spoke...not exactly *slowly*, Mike thought to himself, but *carefully*, as though she was intent on using just the right word and would be embarrassed if she used the wrong one. She reminded him of a boy he had known back in Montauk who has from India and who was *mostly* fluent in English, but still struggled sometimes with pronunciation and word choice.

Was she a foreign exchange student? Is that why he didn't know her? Maybe she was new.

"It's nothing," Mike answered with a shrug, trying to play it cool.

The expression on the girl's face told him in no uncertain terms that she didn't believe him for a second.

'Well, at least she's fluent in bullshit.'

"Fine, I got my ass kicked by this mouth-breather named Troy, okay?" Mike finally admitted. He turned away, not wanting to be witness to the girl's disgusted or disappointed look once she discovered what a loser he really was.

As such, he almost missed it when, instead of abandoning him or looking upon him with pity, the girl instead began to giggle lightly. Confused, Mike turned to watch as her eyes lit up and the edges of her mouth curled upwards in an amused smile. She was blushing lightly, almost as though she was embarrassed to find herself laughing so openly, but as far as Mike was concerned, it only made

her look more beautiful.

"What's so funny?" he asked tentatively.

"You," the girl said as she finally stopped laughing, but didn't stop smiling. "Mouth-breather. That's funny."

"You think so?"

The girl nodded, still smiling.

'Holy shit, someone's actually laughing with me and not at me,' Mike thought as he felt himself begin to smile in turn. *'I think I'm in love.'*

"Here," the girl said as she stood up and offered her hand, which Mike gladly accepted.

With her help, Mike managed to get himself back up onto his feet, after which he let her guide him to one of the many benches lining the parking lot of the high school. The parking lot was clearing out quickly now, with all of the buses having departed and the line of cars slowing down to a trickle. Mike winced slightly as the girl helped lower him onto the uncomfortable metal seat of the closest bench, doing his best to ignore the way his heart fluttered when she sat down beside him.

"Thanks," he said again with a small smile. "My name's Mike, by the way, short for Michael. Michael Wheeler. But you can just call me Mike, or Frogface, or Smartass, or Loudmouth, or whatever the hell everyone else is calling me these days."

He was pleasantly surprised when she giggled again, and he couldn't help but smile wider.

"Mike," she finally said once her laughs had subsided. "I'll call you Mike. I'm Eleanor."

"Eleanor, huh? What do your friends call you?"

Her face fell at that, and she shrugged. "Don't know. I just moved here. I don't have any friends yet."

"Yeah? How long have you been in Hawkins?"

"Um, about three months."

That would explain why Mike had never seen her before. She had just moved to Hawkins; this wasn't just her first day of high school, this was her first day of life in Hawkins in general. No wonder she had been the only one to help him: she hadn't known any better.

"Okay, well...maybe I can call you El? Short for Eleanor?" he ventured at last, wincing slightly as his rather lame attempt to come up with a nickname for her. "I mean...if you want. Totally up to you. I don't have to call you anything if you don't want. I just thought, you know...yeah."

'Smooth, Wheeler. You've really outdone yourself this time. Gold star.'

But Eleanor didn't seem to mind. "El." She frowned as she spoke the word, as if trying it out for the first time. After a moment or so, however, she smiled. "Yes. I like that. I am El."

'Holy shit, that actually worked?'

"El it is," Mike said with a smile, holding his hand out to her. "Nice to meet you, El."

"Nice to meet you, Mike," El responded, grasping her hand with his own and shaking.

'Alright, Wheeler, time to quit while you're ahead. You made her laugh, you gave her a nickname, you even shook her hand for some damn reason. Don't push your luck!'

"Well, thanks again for making sure I didn't bleed out on school grounds," Mike said with a sad smile as he began to stand back up, "but I should probably start limping back home. If I'm not back by the time my mom comes home with my little sister, I'll probably be sporting a second black eye tomorrow."

"You're *walking* home?" El asked, so surprised her eyebrows practically flew off her forehead. "But...you're hurt."

"Well, like I said, limping. There's a subtle difference."

El simply shook her head, either not picking up on the humor or not caring. "Stay. My dad is picking me up. I'll ask if he can drop you off. Would that be alright?"

Mike thought about it. It's not like he was particularly looking forward to walking (limping) back home looking like an escapee from the Intensive Care Unit. And regardless of who he was and what he was saying, El seemed to genuinely like him. If it meant spending more time with her, even just a few more minutes...that would be worth it, wouldn't it?

'Yeah, tough choice. Do I or do I not stay here and keep talking with the cute girl? A real head-scratcher, that one.'

"Are you sure?" he asked, just in case. "Your dad won't mind?"

"I don't think so," El said with a shrug. "He's really nice. And he's funny, like you."

"Well..."

The way she was looking at him, brow furrowed slightly in concern and brown eyes soft in the gentle afternoon light, Mike wasn't sure he had much of a choice. If he didn't know any better, he would think she genuinely wanted him to stay.

"Okay," he said at last, and the smile that magically appeared on her face the moment he said that reassured him that he had definitely, definitely, *definitely* made the right decision. He could practically feel his heart melt in his chest.

He sat back down, smiling awkwardly all the while.

"So, um...how was your first day?" he finally asked, desperate for anything to talk about.

El shrugged. "It was okay. You?"

"Believe it or not, it was going pretty well until about half an hour ago," Mike replied, sighing as he leaned back against the metal

bench, happy to take some of the weight off his aching legs. "Good old Troy. No matter how good of a day I have, I can always rely on him to find some way to ruin it. He's like a guardian angel, except he's more of a devil, and instead of dispensing wisdom, he dispenses beatings. But I guess it's good to have a hobby."

"Why does he hurt you?" El asked, looking genuinely confused.

Mike found himself laughing a little, even if it was at his own expense. "Yeah, uh...you're new here, so I guess you don't know, but I'm not exactly the most popular guy in Hawkins."

"Why?"

"Well, according to Troy, it's because I talk too much."

"And that's...bad?"

"I guess. But I mean...I'm also kind of a total nerd. I mean, I like reading books and playing board games and going to the library and taking apart electronics and putting them back together and stuff like that. And I don't like any sports and I don't go to parties or anything but, like, I just don't see the point, you know? Like, what the hell am I supposed to do at a party? Engage in social interaction with my peers? Do I *look* like a people person to you? Hell, I'm barely even a person – "

Mike was about to go on, but El's sudden and abrupt laughter snapped him out of his external monologue. What had started as a light giggling had steadily worked its way up to full-blown laughter, and soon El was practically clutching Mike's arm as she struggled to catch her breath.

"What's so funny?" he asked as he watched her laugh, a smile forming despite himself.

"You," El giggled. "You do talk a lot."

Mike felt his face grow hot. "Told ya. Sorry."

"It's okay," El told him with a smile, her cheeks still flush from laughter. "I like it. It's cute."

'Holy shit, she thinks I'm cute?' Mike asked himself.

"Holy shit, you think I'm cute?" he also said out loud before he could stop himself.

'Fuck, did I just say that out loud?!'

"Fuck, did I just say that out loud?!"

'GODDAMNIT, WHEELER.'

And though El was laughing again, she nonetheless managed to smile and nod her head enthusiastically, nonverbally confirming that, yes, she did indeed thought he was cute.

Mike just about fainted right then and there.

Thankfully, he was spared the embarrassment of having to be resuscitated in the school parking lot when El suddenly stopped laughing and looked up, as though noticing something in the distance.

"Oh, my dad is here," El said, motioning toward the parking lot as she stood up.

Squinting slightly, Mike likewise made to stand up as he looked around for El's father. Save for the two dozen cars parked in the faculty lot, the rest of the parking lot was mostly empty. The only moving vehicle he saw was a familiar Blazer slowly pulling off the main road and heading for the school, *'HAWKINS POLICE'* emblazoned on its doors. Mike recognized it as the vehicle of Chief Hopper, the town sheriff, Hawkins only really having three squad cars in total.

"Where is he?" Mike asked. "Is he following the chief?"

El giggled. "No, silly. He is the chief."

Somewhere, a record scratched.

If Mike had felt like he was going to faint when El told him he was cute, it was nothing compared to how lightheaded he felt upon

hearing her claim her father was the *police chief*. He could literally feel all the blood rush from his head as his face paled in terror and his sweat glands kicked into maximum overdrive.

'I've been flirting with the daughter of the chief of police,' he realized with growing apprehension. *'I am so monumentally screwed.'*

"You, uh...didn't tell me your father was Chief Hopper," Mike stammered, feeling his throat immediately grow dry.

"You didn't ask," El said. She raised an eyebrow in confusion. "Is that a problem?"

'God, I hope not.'

Mike found himself frozen in place as the Blazer pulled right up to the sidewalk in front of them, but El didn't even wait for the vehicle to fully come to a stop before leaping from the bench and bounding over to the driver's side with a smile on her face. The driver's door opened and out came Chief Jim Hopper.

'Good lord, the man looks like he punches dinosaurs in the face for a living,' Mike thought to himself as he watched El throw her arms around him in a hug.

While somewhat hyperbolic, Mike's assertion wasn't entirely wrong. Hopper was an intimidating man with or without the police uniform, burly and bearded, and had almost certainly been a lumberjack in a previous life. Mike had only ever seen the chief once or twice since moving to Hawkins, and always from a distance, but he had heard the stories about his stone-cold stare, his omnipresent cigarettes, and the permanent scowl painted onto his face.

But the Chief Hopper Mike saw now didn't look like he had heard the stories. Though still dressed in his police uniform, sans his wide-brimmed hat, there wasn't a cigarette to be seen, nor was there a hint of a frown. Instead, Hopper's eyes seemed to light up and a smile overtook his features the moment he stepped out of the Blazer and saw El running towards him. He even laughed as he felt the girl throw herself at him before hugging her back and then ruffling a hand in her curly brown hair.

"Hey, kiddo, sorry to keep you waiting," Hopper asked as El finally pulled away, a fatherly smile still curling the edges of his mouth. "How was your first day of school?"

El shrugged again, just as she had when Mike asked that same question. "It was okay. But I made a friend!" She frowned suddenly, as if realizing something, and then turned to look back at Mike. "We're friends now, right?"

Mike blinked, still frozen in place. "Uh, yeah?"

"Good," El said with a smile, turning back to her father. "His name is Mike."

"Wheeler," Mike added, awkwardly holding out his hand because he figured that's what he was supposed to do. "Mike Wheeler, sir. It's, um, nice to meet you, sir. Uh, sir."

"Just the one 'sir' is plenty, Mike," Hopper said as he approached the young man and shook his hand. Though still friendly in demeanor, Mike could feel Hopper looking him up and down, taking in the blood and bruises and the quickly blackening eye. "Wheeler, huh? As in...Ted and Karen Wheeler?"

"Yes, sir," Mike said, already feeling his voice growing smaller each time he spoke. "They're my parents, sir."

"Huh. I didn't know the Wheelers had a son."

"I didn't know you had a daughter," Mike said before he could stop himself. "Sir."

"Neither did I until about three months ago."

'Oh.'

"I was an accident," El piped in with a smile, which only caused the chief to squeeze his eyes closed in exasperation.

"We've been over this, Eleanor," he said, suddenly red in the face. "You weren't an accident. You were a *surprise*. It's different."

El just shrugged. "I offered Mike a ride home. Is that alright?"

"I don't see why not," Hopper said with a shrug of his own as he turned back to look at Mike. "What the hell happened to you, anyway?"

"I got beat up by a kid named Troy," Mike admitted.

"A mouth-breather," El added.

Hopper frowned. "Troy, huh? Troy Peyton?"

"You know him?"

Hopper chuckled. "Yeah, I know him. He's the reason I'm late picking up Eleanor here. I caught him slashing the tires on a truck off Chestnut and had to drive him to the station. Good way to start off the new school year."

"Seriously?!" Mike exclaimed. Even he had trouble believing this. "He only lives like three blocks away! I can practically see his house from here! You're telling me he couldn't make it half a mile without committing a felony?"

"Karma's a bitch, kid," Hopper said with a smile. "Now come on, you can hop in the back. You live off Maple, right?"

And that's how Mike Wheeler found himself sitting in the back of a police cruiser being driven home on the very first day of high school. To say the drive was awkward would be an understatement, and the only thing that kept Mike from feeling like he had just been arrested was the fact that El kept looking back at him every so often, as if checking to make sure he was still there.

"Are you okay?" she finally asked him after looking back for the sixth or seventh time, only a few minutes into the drive.

"Yeah?" he responded. "I mean, aside from the black eye and the broken nose and the missing tooth and the internal bleeding. Why?"

"You aren't talking," El said simply. "I like it when you talk."

Mike couldn't stop himself. "Does that mean you don't think I'm cute anymore?"

'Damn it, Wheeler, stop flirting with her! The chief is RIGHT. OVER. THERE.'

El paused, as if studying him for a moment, before she smiled again. "No. Still cute."

Hopper coughed conspicuously, as if to remind Mike and El that he was indeed still there, and while Mike felt suitably chastised and was just about to promise he wouldn't say another word for the remaining duration of the drive (or for the rest of his life, if that's what the chief desired), it seemed to do nothing to deter El.

"Dad, do *you* think Mike is cute?"

'WHAT?'

Mike paled as he glanced up up to see Hopper's pale blue eyes looking back at him through the rear view mirror, staring at him with the same intensity Mike had seen in El's eyes when first he had opened his eyes to see her standing above him in the grass.

'Huh, like father, like daughter.'

"Cute as a button," Hopper finally stated, eyes back on the road. "Could use a little sun, though. And maybe some Neosporin."

El smiled as she looked back at Mike. "See? Dad's never wrong."

Hopper merely nodded in agreement, and Mike let out a sigh of relief.

'I might actually make it out of this car alive after all,' he thought.

"Mike said I'm pretty."

'They'll never find my body.'

"Did he, now?" Hopper asked as he glanced into the rear view mirror once again, smirking as he watched the boy's eyes widen in horror.

Mike gulped. "In my defense, sir, I have pretty much no filter whatsoever on the best of days, and I'm pretty sure I have at least a minor concussion. Sir."

"So...you *don't* think my daughter pretty?" Hopper asked, suddenly frowning.

'*Shitshitshitshit.*'

"No, no, no, no, no, El is definitely pretty!" Mike exclaimed, his mouth once again working faster than his brain. "Totally pretty! Super pretty! She's, like, the prettiest girl I've ever seen, and I've seen a lot of pretty girls! Well, not *a lot*, I mean, I'm not a creep or a stalker or whatever, I don't go around looking for pretty girls or anything, but, like, I have cable, you know? And there's pretty girls on cable and there's pretty girls in our school, and I'm sure there are pretty girls in lots of other places I haven't been to, but El's definitely the prettiest out of all of them, and – "

Mike probably would have gone on talking until he was out of breath had Hopper's sudden snort of laughter not interrupted him, alerting Mike to the fact that (*of course*) he wasn't in trouble at all, and that the chief of police had just played him for a fool. Eyes wide with realization and more than a little embarrassment, he turned to El for help, only to find she was also regarding him with an amused smile on her face, biting her lip as though to keep from laughing herself.

"Oh, god," he groaned, face glowing red as he leaned back in his seat. "You were messing with me."

"Yeah, I was messing with you," Hopper confirmed, still fighting back laughter. "Got one hell of a mouth on you, huh?"

"It's how I cope."

"Yeah, with what?"

"With the fact that my life is a joke," Mike muttered, wishing the ground would just open up and swallow him whole.

Hopper laughed again, reaching over to nudge El as he did so. "You have a good eye for friends, kid. I like this one."

"Yeah," El said with a smile, her own cheeks a bright pink in color as she looked back at Mike. "I like him, too."

Mike smiled weakly back at her, his heart fluttering in his chest.

'Well, if I'm gonna die of embarrassment, at least I'll die looking at her.'

"So, 'El,' huh?" Hopper spoke up, looking over at his daughter. "That's new."

"Yes," El said with another small smile. "El. Short for Eleanor. Like Mike, short for Michael."

"I like it," Hopper said after a moment's consideration, and Mike looked up just in time to watch as the chief of police gave him an approving wink by way of the rear view mirror.

'I officially have no idea what the hell is even going on anymore,' Mike thought to himself.

Finally – *finally* – Hopper turned onto Maple Street and Mike sat up as the chief pulled up alongside his house, parking just in front of the driveway.

"Why don't you help Mike to the door?" Hopper asked his daughter as he sat back in his seat, clearly not intending on getting out himself. "Don't want him collapsing on the driveway."

El didn't even answer, she just smiled and nodded as she undid her seatbelt.

"You take care, Wheeler," Hopper said, turning around to face Mike as the boy also unfastened his seatbelt and made to get out of the car. "And call me if Troy tries anything again, you hear?"

"Uh, yeah, will do," Mike stammered, his hand already on the door handle. "And, um...thanks again. For the ride. Sir."

Hopper chuckled. "Anytime, kid. Now get out of my car."

"Yes, sir!"

El carefully helped Mike out of the car, supporting him as best she could, though there was really little she had to do, considering Mike's problem was moreso with his balance than anything wrong with his legs. He still appreciated, however, and took the opportunity to savor being so close to El, if even for such a short period of time and for so humiliating a reason.

"Thanks again," Mike said to El as they finally reached his front door. "Like, for everything. For helping me up, for staying with me, for getting your dad to drive me home. No one else has ever done anything like this for me before, you know? And I, um...I really appreciate it. I owe you. Like, a lot."

El just smiled and shook her head. "We're friends. You don't owe me."

"No, I do, big time," Mike assured her, going so far as to reach down and take one of her hands in his just to demonstrate how serious he was. "I mean it, I'll do anything. Anything."

El stared at him for a moment, her brow furrowing in thought, as if she was trying to come up with some way for Mike to repay her right and then and there. When she finally did speak again, Mike noticed her cheeks were tinged with pink and she had a shy smile on her face.

"Anything?" she asked.

"Anything!" Mike answered. "Whatever you want! I'll carry your books to class every day, or clean your whole house, or...or give you all of my lunch money for the rest of the year. I'll even let you beat me up if you want to try it out – pretty sure everyone else has – on the condition that I get a day or two to recuperate first because I already kinda feel like I'm dying right now."

El just giggled again. "None of that."

"Then, what?"

"Answer a question."

Mike blinked. "That's it?"

El nodded. "But you have to answer honestly. No lying."

"Of course not," Mike reassured her with a small smile as he remembered the words he and his friends back in Montauk used to say to each other. "Friends don't lie."

El's face was growing red again, and she seemed to be having trouble looking him in the eye, and for a second Mike was concerned, worried that he had said or done something wrong. But then the moment passed and she was shaking her head and looking at him head-on with a much more confident expression as she finally asked her question.

"Do you really think I'm pretty?"

Mike's eyes widened. He looked at El with her baggy sweater and faded jeans; with her curly mess of brown hair and her pale face; with her autumn fire eyes that burned with an intensity that made a shiver run down his spine, and for a moment, everything else seemed to fade away.

He no longer felt the soreness in his jaw where Troy had knocked out his tooth, or his eye pulsing in his head, or the sticky blood drying around his nose. He no longer thought about Troy, or how shitty his first day of high school had been, or how much trouble he was going to be in once his parents got a look at him. He no longer saw his home, or his neighborhood, or Hopper waiting in his Blazer at the end of the driveway.

All he saw was her. The girl who helped him. The girl who laughed with him. The girl who called him cute.

El.

And for the first time that day, Mike's mouth and brain were on the exact same page.

'God, yes.'

"God, yes."

And Mike watched as El beamed at him, cheeks burning red, and,

ignoring the fact that her father was sitting in his police cruiser literally twenty feet away, leaned in and planted a kiss on his lips so quickly he would have missed it had he blinked.

It was over before Mike even realized what was happening, but that didn't stop his own cheeks from bursting into flames or keep his heart from skipping three or four consecutive beats in a row. A dopey smile slowly made its way across his face, and he watched as El smiled back shyly, her eyes darting back and forth between his and literally anything and everything else.

"So," she said at last, "I'll see you at school tomorrow?"

"Huh? Oh! Oh, yeah," Mike said with a start, shaking himself out of whatever dimension his mind had been slowly slipping into. "Yeah, school. Right. Tomorrow. Definitely."

El smiled. "Okay. Bye, Mike!"

"Bye, El," Mike started to say as El suddenly turned on her heel and practically sprinted back to the Blazer.

And then she was in the cruiser and it was pulling out of the driveway and Mike smiled as he saw El waving goodbye from the passenger side, returning her heartfelt gesture with a small wave of his own.

'Well, the first day of high school might have sucked,' he thought to himself as he watched the Blazer disappear into the distance, his one hand still raised in farewell, 'but at least now I have a reason to look forward to the second.'

A/N: So, what do you think? Still want more? Let me know in the comments!

2. Mike Loses His Mind

A/N: Sooooo, looks like this is gonna become a multi-chapter story, since literally every other comment I have received thus far has demanded I continue it. And I just happen to be willing enough to oblige you all.

Who knew loudmouth Mike Wheeler would prove to be such a hit?

Wednesday, September 4th, 1985.

'Either I'm in love, or I'm developing serious heart palpitations,' Mike thought to himself as he traversed the wilderness of the crowded hallways of Hawkins High, his heart aflutter with excitement. *'With my luck, it's probably the palpitations.'*

The events of the previous day seemed almost like a dream to Mike, or at least the events which occurred from approximately 3:25 to 4:00 PM. Everything that had occurred before that time, including but not limited to arriving to school late on his first day, getting lost three separate times, losing his lunch money, and then graciously donating a pint of blood to the grassy knoll by the parking lot, courtesy of Troy Peyton, was fairly standard. He had no trouble believing any of that had happened, as most of it had happened to him before, and would most likely happen again many times in the future, fairly regularly, in fact.

What Mike still had trouble believing was that he had met the most beautiful girl in the world yesterday, that he had *befriended* said girl after she had helped him, and that her father – the *chief of police* – had personally driven him home yesterday. But what he most had trouble believing was that she had *kissed* him.

That's right. *She* had kissed *him*. Not the other way around. A girl had kissed Mike Wheeler, and she hadn't even been drunk.

'And to think, all I had to do was breathlessly explain how I thought she was the prettiest girl in the entire world while being held hostage by her father in the backseat of a police cruiser,' he thought. *'It's a wonder I*

don't get more action.'

And that was exactly why Mike was so excited as he wove in and out between gossiping girls, boisterous boys, and several couples seemingly making out in the middle of the hallway. Despite the onslaught of classes he had already powered through, and the metric ton of homework he had already been assigned, he kept himself focused on one thing and one thing only: it was time for lunch, and he planned to have it with El.

Mike finally made it into the cafeteria, lunchbox in tow, and immediately set about looking for El. Problem was, he couldn't seem to find her. She wasn't in line to buy food, she didn't appear to be sitting at any of the tables, and there was no way she would have stayed behind to eat lunch in a classroom on only the second day of school, right? Growing increasingly desperate, he noticed some of his fellow students exiting the back of the cafeteria in order to eat on some of the picnic tables outside, and decided he might as well check out there.

"Oh, god, direct sunlight," Mike bemoaned as he stepped outside, immediately squinting as he struggled to look around for El. Try as he might, though, scanning over the many picnic tables and even the bleachers in the distance, he couldn't seem to find any trace of her.

'Holy shit, she really was just an hallucination, wasn't she?' he thought to himself in horror. 'She never really existed at all. It was all in my head! Troy hit me so hard that he knocked something loose and I went off the deep end and imagined I was rescued by a beautiful girl who gave me a ride home in her magical cop car. There's no El, there's never been any El, she's just a figment of my imagination, she never existed and now I'll have to spend the rest of my life wondering what could have –'

' – oh, no, wait, there she is.'

Sitting in the shade of a lone tree halfway between the picnic tables and the bleachers was El in all her simple, unassuming glory, wearing another pair of faded jeans and a plaid, long-sleeved button-down shirt that would have looked tacky on anyone else. Her short brown hair was as curly and unkempt as ever, and there was a smile on her face as her fiery brown eyes scanned the pages of a magazine she

held indicating she had not yet noticed Mike.

'Okay, Wheeler, you can do this,' Mike reassured himself as he began walking towards El in what he hoped was a calm and nonchalant manner. *'Be cool. You're just gonna walk up and ask to join her. That's it. No showboating, nothing fancy. Just walk and breathe. Even you can't screw this up.'*

So, of course, he had to trip on the very first object his foot came into contact with.

Mike didn't even have time to widen his eyes or cry out before he felt his feet fall out from under him, and the next thing he knew he was lying facedown in the grass for the second time in as many days.

'Well, if this whole high school thing doesn't work out, I can always look forward to a promising career in lawn care.'

He stood back up quickly and, with as much dignity as he could muster (*seriously, who the hell just left a banana peel laying around like that?*), cleaned some of the grass and dirt off his pants as he did his best to ignore the light laughter of the students who had witnessed his nosedive. Thankfully, El had not been one of them, her nose still buried in *Soap Opera Digest*.

'Alright, take two,' Mike contemplated as he took a deep breath and tried again. This time, he made it past the picnic tables and all the way to El without incident. El looked up from her magazine as he approached, as though sensing his presence, and he felt his breath catch in his throat as she graced him with a smile so sweet she might as well have coated him in sugar and dipped him in caramel.

'Yup, definitely heart palpitations.'

"Hi, Mike," she said, her smile only growing wider as he came to a stop in front of her.

"Uh, h-hey, El," Mike stammered, his confidence disappearing faster than his sister Nancy had the moment she graduated from high school. "Can I join you?"

El nodded and scooted over slightly, so as to give Mike room under

the shady part of the tree.

"Thanks," he said as he sat down beside her, sure to give her at least half a foot of space in case she suddenly came to her senses and realized she was sitting next to Michael 'Frogface' Wheeler and wanted to make a run for it. He was considerate like that. "So, um, how are you?"

"I'm okay," El said with a shrug. "Are you feeling better?"

"Oh, yeah, definitely," Mike answered, suddenly remembering his black eye, broken nose, and the fact that his face must have looked like the least appetizing plate of Hamburger Helper ever served to another human being. "I mean, sure, I'm probably gonna have to kiss my lifelong dream of becoming a male model goodbye, but all of my limbs and organs otherwise appear to be in working condition, and really, what more can a guy like me ask for?"

El laughed, and he smiled.

"You're funny," she said when her giggles ceased.

"Yeah, but looks aren't everything," Mike said with a wink, quickly noticing that El had nothing with her save for the magazine now lying on the grass by her crossed legs. "Did you eat already?"

El shook her head. "I forgot my lunch at home. But it's okay."

"What? Screw that! You can have some of mine," Mike reassured her as he opened his lunchbox to reveal half a dozen cold slices of pizza wrapped in tinfoil and folded so they could all fit. "You like pepperoni?"

"You have pizza?" El asked excitedly, her eyes widening as if the concept of packing pizza for lunch had never even occurred to her.

"Yeah, it's leftover from last night," Mike explained as he began to unravel the tinfoil. "My parents have been fighting a lot recently – like, *a lot* – which means neither of them ever wants to cook anymore, so my mom usually just orders pizza for dinner. I mean, it sucks that they're fighting and all, but hey...free pizza!"

He pulled out the first slice of pizza and handed it to El, who accepted it with a smile and a small "thanks." For a minute, the two of them just ate pizza together in silence, and Mike marveled at how oddly comfortable it was between them despite the fact they had only known each other for less than a day. Normally, he felt the need to run his mouth almost constantly, as if silence somehow meant he was doing something wrong, but with El...it was different. A *good* different.

As such, he was surprised when the voice that finally broke the silence turned out *not* to be his.

"Why were they fighting?" El asked, finishing her first slice of pizza and going for a second.

"What's that?"

"You said your parents were fighting. Why?"

"Oh, I don't know," Mike answered, still chewing on his last bite of crust. "I stopped paying attention to 'why' a long time ago. They've been like this ever since we moved here, which makes sense, I guess, since my dad was really the only one who wanted to move. We used to live in Montauk – you know, in New York? – but then my dad got a new position or something and we had to move here. I don't think my mom really wanted to move. None of us did."

"Why not?" El asked curiously.

"Well, according to my mom, since my dad was only being promoted from 'Assistant to the Regional Manager' to 'Assistant Regional Manager,' it wasn't even that big of a promotion to begin with, so why uproot the entire family if –"

"Not that," El interrupted, shaking her head in clarification. "Why didn't *you* want to move?"

"Oh." Mike paused. "Because...that's where all my friends were, I guess."

He felt something heavy and hard in his stomach when he thought about his friends back in Montauk. Sure, he still heard from them

every now and then (especially Will, who called every Saturday morning just to talk, which Mike deeply appreciated, even if it was only for half an hour or so), but it wasn't the same as actually *being there*. Since coming to Hawkins, friendship was simply something he didn't get to experience anymore. When he spoke of his friends, it was always in the past tense, as though they were somehow gone...or somehow weren't even his friends anymore.

"You miss them," El stated softly.

"Yeah," Mike admitted quietly. "I guess I do."

'And there I go, ruining everything,' he thought to himself with a sigh. 'All El wanted was to sit down and read her magazine and spend some time outside, but I had to come along and get all depressing. Good lord, no wonder most people just beat me up and move on.'

And so, Mike was surprised when, instead of hitting him or walking away or doing anything like that, El reached over and took his hand in hers, intertwining her fingers with his and then squeezing affectionately. She smiled softly, and Mike could feel his heart flutter as he saw the dim sunlight gleaming in her autumn fire eyes.

"Tell me about them," she said. "Your friends. I want to know."

And just like that, he was off again, mouth running a mile a minute as he did his best to describe his friends as illustratively as possible, and with no shortage of words.

He told her how Will was the heart of the group, the glue that bound them together with his artistry and his kindness, and how he was quiet and sensitive but was also the only one that knew how to get the rest of the Party to shut up once they had gotten into one of their legendary arguments.

He told her how Dustin was by far the most talkative of the Party, the most excitable, and certainly the most enthusiastic, a veritable encyclopedia of scientific facts, swear words, and useless tidbits of information that he nonetheless found so fascinating that he was utterly incapable of *not* sharing with his friends.

He told her how Lucas was his next-door neighbor and had, for a long time, been the one he turned to the most when he needed help with school or social activity or with dealing with the antics of his family, because, even though Lucas was just as clueless as Mike, he was nonetheless always ready and willing to help out.

He told her how Max was the only girl in the group simply because she never really *acted* like a girl, constantly challenging (and inevitably outmaneuvering) the boys in everything from arcade games to bike races to arm-wrestling competitions, as though determined to prove she was more of a 'man' than they ever would be.

He told her how they used to gather together in his basement to play *Dungeons & Dragons* every Sunday evening, how they biked around town to get to school or to the woods or to the arcade, how they won Science Fair after Science Fair year after year, always working together.

He told her everything. He spoke for minutes upon minutes upon minutes, and for the first time in a long time...he felt like the person he was talking to was actually *listening*. By the time Mike finally stopped talking, they had finished the last of the pizza and half of the lunch period had most certainly passed.

"They sound like good friends," El said with a smile as Mike fought to catch his breath, having evidently forgotten to do so while he was talking.

"Yeah," Mike admitted with a sad smile of his own. "The best."

El was silent for a moment before saying, "You're my first friend."

"You mean, in Hawkins?"

El shook her head. "Not just in Hawkins. Ever."

"Ever?" Mike repeated, eyes widening as he looked at her. "Come on, you had to have had friends back in...uh...wherever you were from."

"Indianapolis," El told him, laughing lightly. "I'm from Indianapolis."

"Oh."

"I lived with Mama," El began, not noticing the eyebrow Mike raised upon hearing her refer to her mother in such a seemingly childish manner. "It was just the two of us. She didn't let me out much. She taught me how to read and how to count, and gave me lots of books so I could teach myself everything else."

"You didn't go to school?" Mike asked, eyebrows raising farther still.

"No," El confirmed. "Mama wouldn't let me. She said it was too dangerous."

"Dangerous how?"

"Germs," El said with a small shrug, as if she wasn't sure she believed it herself. "Mama got sick a lot. And I get nosebleeds."

"I get those, too," Mike said with a sigh. "But usually, it's because someone punched me in the face."

El giggled again, and Mike's heart fluttered.

"One day, Mama got really sick...and didn't get any better," El continued, her eyes now cast down at the ground and her brow furrowed in thought, as though it was difficult for her to remember. "She wouldn't get out of her bed, and she started talking to people who weren't there. Like she was dreaming, but awake. She wouldn't eat or drink, so I called 911 because that's what I thought I was supposed to do, and then they took me away."

"Is she okay?" Mike asked. "Your mom, I mean?"

El shrugged. "She lives with my Aunt Becky now. They said she couldn't take care of me anymore, so they sent me to live here with my dad. He didn't even know I existed. He only knew Mama for a little while and then they never saw each other again."

Considering Chief Hopper's reputation around town as a hopeless womanizer, this didn't sound too surprising to Mike. And the more Mike thought about it, the more the rest of El's story made sense. No wonder she seemed so innocent and pure and kind; she literally had

no idea how awful the real world could be. It also explained her somewhat careful speech pattern, her relatively new arrival in Hawkins, and even the general unease she displayed in a school environment. All of these situations – from meeting people, to going to class, to having conversations with someone who wasn't her mother – were new to her.

He was brought out of his thoughts when he suddenly heard El snuffle beside him, and watched as she used one of her sleeves to wipe away some freshly shed tears slowly making their way down her cheeks.

'Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, I made her cry!'

"I'm sorry," she said softly, smiling as though she were trying to play it off. "I don't mean to cry. I just..."

She trailed off.

"You miss her," Mike finished for her, squeezing her hand; they had not let go since she first took his hand in hers.

El nodded.

Mike's next action he did without even thinking, which was good, because if he had actually had time to think about it, he almost certainly would not have had the *cojones* to actually go through with it. Letting go of El's hand, he instead scooted closer so that their legs were practically right up against each other and snaked his arm around her shoulders in what he hoped was an affectionate and reassuring gesture.

When El sighed and leaned into his embrace, going so far as to rest her head comfortably on his shoulder, Mike just about died.

'Holy hell, she's cuddling with me,' he thought to himself, already sensing the way his heart felt like it was about to burst out of his chest. *'I put my arm around her shoulders and instead of getting slapped or maced or publically castrated, she's cuddling with me. What am I supposed to do now? Do I kiss her? Do I go for first base? What even is first base, anyway? How many bases are there in baseball? Jesus Christ, what base am I at right now?'*

"Thank you," El whispered softly, finally pulling Mike out of his own head, her eyes closing as she snuggled into the crook of Mike's shoulder.

"For what?" Mike asked.

"For being my friend," she answered, her eyes still closed. "My first friend."

Mike couldn't help but laugh a little, causing El to open her eyes and look up at him, but refusing to lift her head or move out from within his embrace.

"I should be thanking you," he told her. "I think you're the first person outside of my immediate family who has ever managed to listen to me talk for more than ten seconds without wanting to tear out my vocal chords."

El laughed.

"And besides, if it wasn't for you, I would probably still be bleeding to death by the parking lot right now."

"You already thanked me for that yesterday," El reminded him.

"And I still greatly appreciate it, because otherwise I would not be sitting here right now spending time with you and slowly burning to a crisp in the hot September sun," Mike responded, once again earning a short laugh as his reward. He took a deep breath before speaking again. "You know, at the risk of sounding like a total creep, I've been looking forward to seeing you all day. It's pretty much the only thing that's kept me going today."

El smiled up at him softly, her cheeks growing hot and red, and it took everything in Mike's power not to smile back at her like a deranged marmoset. "Me, too."

And then her eyes were closing and she was leaning up towards him and his hand was tightening on her shoulder and he was leaning down and closing his own eyes and –

'Holy shit, we're totally gonna kiss,' he finally realized. 'She's gonna kiss

me and I'm gonna kiss her and it's gonna be a real kiss, not like that super quick kiss she gave me yesterday or the way Holly always tries to kiss me after she's just downed an entire jug of orange juice and she wants to see me suffer. An actual, real, potentially mind-blowing kiss.'

He could practically feel the gentle heat of her lips on his already...

'Nothing could ruin this moment.'

"Hey, Frogface!"

'There we go.'

As if synchronized, Mile and El both opened their eyes and drew back upon hearing the angry voice cut into their moment, both of them looking around just in time to find none other than Troy Peyton marching towards them.

'What, was I Hitler in a previous life or something?'

"You've got some nerve, Wheeler," Troy snarled as he came to a stop right in front of them, glaring down at Mike incredulously. "Pretty ballsy of you to show your face around here after that ass-kicking I gave you yesterday."

Mike frowned in genuine confusion. "Well, I fucking go to school here, so..."

"You know what I mean!" Troy snapped. He suddenly looked over at El, as if just noticing she was there. "Who the hell are you?"

"Eleanor Hopper," El answered simply, blinking in confusion.

"Hopper?" Troy repeated. "You're the chief's daughter?"

El nodded, still not sure what was going on.

"Your asshole dad tried to bust me yesterday!" Troy said, this time loud enough that it made El flinch in surprise.

"Well, to be fair, you were trying to slash someone's tires," Mike spoke up, standing as he did so. If he was going to get his ass kicked

again, he preferred to have it done while he was on his own two feet. "I mean, cause and effect, Troy."

Troy eyed him dangerously. "You getting smart with me, Loudmouth?"

Mike was about to reply with yet another smartass answer when he was suddenly interrupted by El, still sitting beneath him, as she gasped upon finally realizing who Troy was.

"Oh! You're the mouth-breather!"

It took everything within Mike not to burst into laughter.

"The fuck did you say to me?" Troy asked her, now moving threateningly in her direction.

"What, are you dumb *and* deaf?" Mike cut in, quickly stepping in front of El protectively as she also began to get to her feet. "She called you a mouth-breather. You know, because if I covered your fat mouth for more than thirty seconds you'd suffocate and die because you're too fucking stupid to figure out how to breathe outta your nose like a normal goddamn human being."

A hush fell across the thirty or so students sitting on the nearby picnic tables, all of them evidently having heard what Mike said. Now all of them were watching with apt attention, and Troy was so red he looked like he was about to burst.

"You watch your fucking mouth, Wheeler," he threatened.

"Or what?" Mike exclaimed, trying to ignore the fact that his peers were now watching the argument unfold. "Look at me, asshole! I *already* look like I spent all night getting fucked in the face by a bowling ball! What are you gonna do, give me another black eye? Knock out another tooth? Real fucking creative!"

"You think I won't?" Troy challenged him.

"No, I don't," Mike stated, suddenly sounding a lot braver than he really was. He remembered what his father had told him years ago, not about laughing and crying, but about *confrontation*.

"Bullies only pretend to be tough," Ted Wheeler had told his son through a mouthful of savory chicken. "They pick on you because you let them. But if you fight back – if you *confront* them – they'll back off. Because they're cowards, son, all of them."

Mike had never had the chance to put that philosophy to the test before, but now he did. Now, here, he had a chance to confront Troy in front of people, in front of El, whom he had threatened. And so, he took a visible step forward and looked Troy right in the eye, glaring at him with three years' worth of resentment threatening to boil over all at once, his nerves made of steel, his resolve hardened like never before.

"I think you're too much of a chicken-shit to even *touch* me," Mike told him, slowly but powerfully, having never been more certain of anything he had ever said in his entire life, and ready for whatever insult Troy might throw his way.

Unfortunately, Troy's response was not to insult Mike but to punch him in his one good eye so hard that it threw the young man off his feet and sent him tumbling back down to the ground.

'Fucking Dad.'

"Mike!" El cried out as she fell to her knees beside him, ignoring the laughing and jeering of the other students watching from the picnic tables. With her help, Mike was able to successfully roll over onto his stomach and then begin to push himself up onto his hands and knees. He could already feel his eye beginning to bruise.

"Maybe that will teach you to keep your goddamn mouth shut," Troy told him, sneering cruelly as he watched Mike lift a hand to cover his bruised eye. His sneer faltered, however, when he heard Mike mumble something he couldn't quite make out.

"What was that, Loudmouth? You got something to say?"

Mike spoke again, a little louder this time, but Troy still couldn't hear it.

"Speak up, shit-stain! I can't hear you!"

"I – asked – *why*?!" Mike practically shouted, loud enough that it made the surrounding students look up and begin to watch again. He turned to glare at Troy, one hand still covering his newly bruised eye as he spoke again. "Why the *fuck* do you do this?"

"Why do I do what?"

"Why do you *hurt* me all the time?" Mike asked, angrily but honestly, slowly getting back up onto his own two feet with El's assistance. "Why do you call me names? Why do you pick on me? Why do you *bully* me? What did I ever do to deserve this, huh? And don't give me any of that shit about it being my mouth or cuz I'm a nerd or the new kid or whatever. It's bullshit and I know it. So tell me the truth!"

Troy just sneered. "It's cuz you were born, Frogface, you and – "

"I said cut the shit, you greasy fuck!" Mike interrupted him, and the surrounding students 'oohed' and 'aahed' in response like they were watching a live wrestling match. "All this time I thought it was something to do with me, you know? Like, there was something wrong with me. But that's not it, is it, Troy? It's you. I'm not the one who's fucked up...*you* are!"

Mike had no idea what had gotten into him. It was as if something inside him had just finally snapped, as if Troy punching him and humiliating him in front of El had simply been the final straw, the one that broke the camel's back, and now a lifetime's worth of loneliness and anger and vulgar language were spilling out of him faster than he could even process it.

"So, what's the matter, Troy? Huh?" he went on. "What made you like this? What's your goddamn origin story? Did you get dropped on your head as kid? Lick lead paint off the walls? Go swimming in a vat of mercury?"

"Wheeler, shut your – "

"Did your daddy not hug you enough growing up? Is that it? Or did your creepy uncle hug you a little too much?"

Troy's cheeks burned red as the surrounding students began to laugh

and mock, and he knew this time they weren't jeering *with* him – they were jeering *at* him. "You leave my uncle out of – "

"Was it both? I'll bet it was both."

"Shut up, Wheeler!"

"No, *you* shut up!" Mike shouted with such force that El had to fight to keep him from stumbling and falling all over again. "For once – for *just once* – shut your goddamn mouth and keep walking, Troy. Leave me alone. Leave El alone. Leave *all of us* alone. You want to be a walking, talking waste of human potential? Fine! Fan-fucking-tastic and fuck-a-doodle-doo! Go ahead, knock yourself out. Just leave us out of it. Okay?"

And with that, Mike finally stopped talking. He stared at Troy, out of breath, challenging him to respond. The other students likewise watched with the anticipation of a crowd waiting for the fireworks to begin, also expecting Troy to fire back with all cylinders. Even El seemed to be holding her breath.

But Troy just stood there in shock. He didn't attack. He didn't retreat. He didn't even speak. He didn't do *anything*.

Finally, out of patience and out of breath, Mike broke the pregnant pause by taking El's hand in his and leading her back towards the cafeteria. "Come on, El. I feel a nervous breakdown coming on like you would not *believe*."

He brushed by Troy on his way, waking the bully from his stupor, but still Troy could do nothing but watch as Mike and El walked right by him without a word. The two of them had just reached the doors of the cafeteria and were about to walk inside when El finally turned back around to face Troy one last time and flash him a one-fingered victory salute.

"Mouth-breather!" she shouted.

And then they were inside the cafeteria and Mike just kept walking, pulling El past the other tables and the other students and the glassy-eyed teachers until they were out in the hallways alone, and Mike

made a beeline straight for the closest water fountain.

"Mike?" El asked worriedly as the boy practically latched his mouth onto the spigot, gulping down water like it was going out of fashion. "Are you okay?"

When Mike finally shut off the fountain and turned back around to face her, his entire face was drenched in water, hair included, and one of his (blackened) eyes was visibly twitching.

'I can't believe I just fucking did that,' he thought to himself.

"I can't believe I just fucking did that," he also said out loud, running both of his hands through his wet hair, as if trying to rearrange it into a somehow more ridiculous shape than it was already in. "I mean, I really *cannot* fucking believe I just did what I think I just did. I just told off Troy Peyton. Troy. Peyton. The biggest, meanest son of a bitch in all of Hawkins, the guy who has personally had it out for me since I moved to this goddamn town, the guy who has both figuratively and literally replaced every villainous archetype in my mind with his ugly fucking face. I told him off. Me."

"Mike – "

"I am so dead!" Mike rambled on, now pacing back and forth and wringing his hands and running his mouth a million miles per hour with no end in sight. "I'm dead. I'm like *super* dead. I'm dead in like every way known to man, and some known only to animals. Dead, dead, dead, dead, dead. He's gonna fucking kill me. You know that, right? I'm gonna go missing and end up as one of those kids on one of those old milk cartons, but my picture will be all fucked up because *of course* they'll use a picture of me with my broken nose and my black eyes and my missing teeth, ensuring that I'm never found, but it won't matter if I'm found or not, not really, cuz I'll still be *dead either way*."

"Mike...!"

"God, I hope my funeral is nice, at least. Hey, if my mom asks, tell her my favorite color is green, I know I've always said it's blue because I thought that was what I was supposed to say for some

reason, because what kid doesn't like blue, but it's really green, so if she could work the color into the coffin or the décor or something, that would be great, I'd really appreciate it. And tell my dad... actually, don't bother telling my dad anything, he probably won't even show up unless it's on a weekend. Can we schedule it for a weekend? Who schedules funerals? Can I schedule my own funeral? How does that even work? Can I call ahead of time to schedule my own funeral or is that generally frowned upon in funerary – "

He was finally interrupted by the sensation of El's hands on his face and her lips on his own as she grabbed hold of him and kissed him with everything she had.

No longer pacing, and certainly no longer talking, Mike practically found himself frozen in place as El pressed her lips to his, his eyes widening in shock and wonder and confusion and about fourteen thousand other emotions he had never experienced before but desperately, *desperately* wanted to experience again. This wasn't like their previous kiss, a quick peck on the lips so fast Mike had barely even registered it had happened at all; this kiss was different. This kiss was *more*. This kiss was longer, more powerful, more *meaningful*, somehow, and while it certainly didn't slow Mike's racing heartbeat any, at least now he knew it was pounding in his chest for an entirely different reason.

'*I could get used to this,*' he thought to himself as he closed his eyes and finally began to kiss her back.

Mike had no idea how long he kissed El – time seemed to stop the moment their lips first touched, and damned if he had paid even the slightest bit of attention to anything else that might have been happening around them – but the ringing of the lunch bell is what finally brought their kiss to an end, startling both of them into pulling apart. A moment later, the hallways were filled with students either entering or leaving the cafeteria, but as far as Mike was concerned, the only person who mattered was still standing right in front of him.

"What, um...what was that for?" he asked her, his cheeks so red that he was beginning to feel lightheaded. El smiled back at him, just as red as he was.

"You were talking too much," El answered, biting her lip shyly.

Mike grinned. "And...?"

"And it always works in my soaps."

"And...?"

"And..." El began, averting her eyes as her cheeks growing redder still, "because I wanted to."

'Come on, Wheeler, this is your big moment, don't blow it! Say something cool!'

"Radical."

'Kill yourself.'

But El just laughed, as she always did when his brain and his mouth weren't working together, and that almost made it worth it.

"We should go to class," she reminded him, gesturing to the other students rushing to and fro.

"Do we have to?" Mike practically whined. "Can't we just stay here and kiss some more?"

"No," El said with another shy smile. "One kiss at a time. You have to earn them."

'Don't sound too desperate, don't sound too desperate, don't sound too desperate...'

"How? How do I earn them? I have to know!"

'Wow. Perfect middle ground. Well done, jackass.'

But El just smiled. "Go to class, Mike. And...I'll see you later?"

And Mike smiled back. "Definitely."

With that, El finally took off, joining her fellow classmates in the hallway as she headed for her locker, desperately hoping to get her

things and make it to class on time, turning back only to shout "Bye, Mike!"

"Bye, El!" Mike replied as he watched her curly brown locks disappear into the crowd of students.

Unlike the other students hustling and bustling around him, he remained frozen in place, smiling like an idiot and still coming down from the post-kiss euphoria. The hallways around him grew emptier and emptier, and it wasn't until he was entirely alone that he finally allowed himself a sigh of contentment.

'Maybe high school won't be so bad after all,' he thought to himself.

Of course, that was when the next bell rang, and Mike realized he was late to class. Again.

'Shit.'

A/N: I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter as much as you enjoyed the first, because I'll admit it was a tough act to follow. Also, full disclosure: I haven't the faintest idea of how long this story will be, and updates may be sporadic. So...just keep that in mind.

Be sure to tell me what you think in the comments!

3. Mike Screws The Pooch

A/N: Aaaaand we're back for more. Sorry about the long wait, but I took the time between chapters to plot out exactly where I want this story to go and how long that might take.

Also, head's up: this one gets sad. And Mike's language doesn't get any better.

Saturday, September 14th, 1985.

Michael Wheeler was confused.

This was not in itself an odd thing; Mike found he was confused quite a lot. Even at fourteen, he realized there were many things about the world he didn't yet understand, after all. He didn't understand why he was bullied and picked on so much at school, for example, despite mostly keeping to himself. He didn't understand why sports and athletics were praised and celebrated with parades and pep rallies, while scholastic achievements like Honor Roll were largely rewarded with bumper stickers and a two-second 'thumbs up' from the principal. And he certainly didn't understand why his parents constantly fought so much, especially when they knew Mike and his sister Holly were watching and listening.

Yes, Mike Wheeler was confused about a great many things, but most of these were things he had either been confused about for a very long time or had simply come to accept as part of life, no matter how strange or unfortunate. But his current confusion was about something else entirely, something that didn't have to do with school or bullies or parents or anything like that, and it was something he had never been confused about in his entire life.

Mike was confused about his relationship with El Hopper. Specifically: what kind of relationship was it?

Ever since their less-than-fairy-tale meeting in the grassy lot by Hawkins High School on the first day of School, Mike and El had become nigh inseparable. Once their daily schedules were finalized, the two of them were happy to discover they had no less than three

classes together (thankfully, P.E. was not one of them, as Mike had no desire to demonstrate how completely uncoordinated he was by flailing around like a newborn orangutan in front of the only girl who had ever called him cute). They also had lunch together every single day, and they took advantage of that to catch each other up on their other classes, as well as developments at home.

All in all, it was fair to say that Mike and El had become remarkably good friends in a remarkably short amount of time, something Mike assumed was simply because neither of them had anyone else to really spend time with. Mike was practically a pariah around Hawkins, and El was the shy, new girl with the mysterious past no one cared to hear. But, honestly, Mike could care less about how or why El had taken such a liking to him so quickly. For three straight years, he hadn't had a single friend in Hawkins. Not a one. But now, suddenly, as though delivered to him by the angels themselves, he had a friend. A good friend. A friend who listened when he talked and laughed at his jokes and thought he was cute.

(Also, Mike thought, she was absolutely fucking beautiful, so that was nice.)

(Oh, and the kisses. The kisses were nice, too. Very nice.)

But it was that last part that was confusing Mike.

"You know it totally sounds like you two are dating, right?" Will had told him over the phone earlier that morning, during his weekly call to the Wheeler household.

Mike had just finished telling Will everything that had occurred since he started high school (Will having been sick and thus unable to call the weekend before), with a rather specific focus on El, but was nonetheless taken aback by his friend's statement.

"We're not *dating*, Will," Mike had replied, frowning as he pressed the phone to his ear. "We're just friends. I mean, we just met like two weeks ago."

"I dunno," Will said slowly over the phone. "You guys just seem really...close."

"Well, yeah," Mike agreed. "But I'm, like, her first friend ever. And she's the first person I've met here in Hawkins who hasn't tried to poison me or bludgeon me to death with a blunt object. Of course we're gonna be close. But we're totally just friends. Like, platonic friends. Really close platonic friends. Really close platonic friends who do really close platonic things together. Platonically."

"Uh-huh," Will replied, obviously unconvinced. "Didn't you tell me she kissed you, like, an hour after meeting you?"

"More like half an hour."

"And then she kissed you *again* the next day?"

"Well, yeah, but – "

"And then like three times since then?"

"Hey, I think I'm getting pretty good at it."

"Dude!"

"Okay, so we've kissed a few times!" Mike unwillingly admitted, fighting against the heat he was beginning to feel in his cheeks. "But that doesn't necessarily *mean* anything. I mean, people kiss all the time. And like I said, we're close. And yeah, she's obviously the most beautiful girl in the entire world and she thinks I'm cute and she smiles every time she sees me and my heart keeps doing this thing where it feels like I'm gonna vomit upside-down, but that doesn't mean we're *dating* or *going out* or anything! We're just friends.

He could practically hear Will roll his eyes over the phone. "Okay, Mike, answer me this: do friends bike each other home every day after school?"

"Sometimes!" Mike answered, perhaps a little too defensively.

"Do friends cuddle together on the couch while they're watching movies?"

"Yes!"

"That one time with Dustin doesn't count."

"Oh. Then...no."

"Do friends hold hands in class?"

"Maybe?"

"Do friends hug each other and say 'I missed you' every single time they see each other?"

"Probably not."

"Do friends bring each other freshly baked cookies to school for lunch?"

"Uh, no."

"Do friends *fall asleep together* when they're supposed to be studying?"

"No..." Mike admitted, ignoring the growing lump in his throat. "Wait, how do you know all this stuff? Have you been spying on me from New York?"

"Mike, you literally *just finished* telling me *all of this*," Will reminded him, laughing as he did so. "We've been on the phone for half an hour and all you've done so far is talk about El. I literally didn't get to say anything beyond 'hello' until like a minute ago."

'*Oh my god, El and I are dating,*' Mike realized. '*But just to be sure...*'

"Hold on, Will, let me check something," Mike said really quickly before pulling the phone away from his face and turning to look into the kitchen. "Hey, Mom?!"

"Yes, Mike?" his mother answered from the kitchen, where she was still busy cleaning the pots and pans from breakfast that morning.

"Does it seem like El and I are dating to you?" Mike asked her as innocently as possible.

Karen Wheeler seemed surprised. "Wait, you *aren't*?"

'Shit.'

Mike returned to the phone. "So...apparently, my mom thinks El and I are dating, too."

"I'm pretty sure *everybody* thinks you and El are dating," Will responds, "and I haven't even seen you two together. So, *are* you two dating?"

'Good question, Wheeler. Are you?'

"...I don't know," Mike finally answered, his eyes widening in realization as he felt his heart sink into his stomach.

"Oh, god, I don't know. I actually, literally, legitimately don't know! It's the kisses, Will, they're intoxicating, they make my head all fuzzy and then I can't think straight, and I can barely think straight on a *good* day, but she's so pretty and she's like the nicest person ever, but I don't know if I'm ready for a relationship, I mean, I'm only fourteen, I don't know if I can make her happy, I can't even make myself happy, plus we only just met like two weeks ago, we can't already be dating, that's weird, that would be totally weird, oh god, why am I like this?!"

"Mike. Breathe."

Mike did so, pulling the phone away from his mouth and taking a deep breath, in and out. He repeated the exercise until such time as he wasn't gasping for air and the thoughts running through his head began to finally calm down and slow to a trickle.

"Better?" Will asked after a moment of silence.

Mike groaned reluctantly. "Slightly. What the hell do I do, Will?"

"Ask her?" Will tried after a moment of thought. "I mean, if anyone would *know*, it would be her, right? Just be careful how you word it. You tend to just...spew things out."

"I legitimately have no idea what you're talking about."

"Uh-huh. Look, Mike, I gotta go before the long-distance charges start

adding up. Just take it slow, okay? And try to relax. And let me know how it goes!"

"I will," Mike said with an uncertain smile. "Tell the Party I said hi."

"Will do. Over and out!"

"Over and out."

That had been ten hours ago.

Now it was eight o'clock, the sun was setting, and Mike and El were lounging on the couch in the basement of the Wheeler residence, patiently waiting for Hopper to arrive and pick El up for the evening. It being a Saturday, the two had finished all of their homework for the weekend and were now simply enjoying each other's company. Mike was sitting upright on the left side of the sofa, reading the latest issue of *X-Men*, while El lay across the couch horizontally, her head on his lap as she mentally devoured Mike's copy of *The Hobbit*.

Or, more accurately, Mike was *trying* to read the latest issue of *X-Men*, because El's presence on the couch alongside him, especially with her head in his lap, was making it very difficult to concentrate on anything except how goddamn *cute* she was.

He also couldn't stop thinking about his phone call with Will earlier.

How had he been friends with El for almost two weeks without ever realizing that maybe – *just maybe* – they might be more than friends? Because Will was right: it's not like before he had left Montauk he had made it a habit to hold hands with Lucas or bake cookies for Max or cuddle on the couch with Dustin (except for that one time). Those weren't things platonic friends did. Those were things boyfriends and girlfriends did.

And now El was lying on the couch with her head in his lap and humming to herself and she looked *so goddamn beautiful* and it was *so goddamn confusing*, and he had no idea what to do.

"Hey, Mike?" El asked, turning away from the novel and instead looking up at him, successfully pulling him out of his own head.

"Yeah, El?" Mike said, lifting his comic book so he could look back down at her.

"I like you."

To say Mike was taken aback was an understatement. Sure, he knew she liked him, they were friends and they were hanging out and she had her head in his lap, but was she talking about *liking* him or *like-liking* him? Was this her way of declaring her eternal love for him? Or was she just being nice? Was he supposed to respond? *How* was he supposed to respond?

'Well, you have to say **something**, Wheeler,' he thought to himself, his mind racing to think of something, *anything*, before it was too late. 'You can't spend all night staring at her like a lovesick lemur. Say something cool, say something smooth, just say **something**!'

"Uh...I like you, too?"

'JESUS FUCKING CHRIST.'

But El seemed satisfied with his answer, smiling up at him and then turning back to *The Hobbit*, quickly losing herself in the world of Middle-Earth and leaving Mike staring down at her with question marks flashing in his eyes.

'What the hell was that about?!'

Mike once again tried to go back to reading his comic book but, also once again, found his thoughts refused to cooperate. Did he like El? *How* did he like El? Did he want to be friends with El or did he want to be boyfriend and girlfriend? Were the kisses a sign? Did El like *him*? *How* did El like him?

'For god's sake, Wheeler, just suck it up and ask already!'

Ignoring the blinking red light in the back of his mind telling him to stop, Mike sighed and closed his comic book, tossing it to the side. El noticed this and closed her own book as a result.

"Mike?" she asked, blinking softly as she looked up at him, tilting her head quizzically as she did so. "What's wrong?"

'Holy hell, she's adorable. I don't deserve her. I really don't.'

"I, um...can I ask you a question?" he finally managed to get out, biting his lip as he asked.

"Yes," El answered. "What kind of question?"

"A question about...us. Like, you and me."

El nodded, still waiting.

'Remember what Will said,' he mentally reminded himself. 'Be smart. Choose your words carefully. Don't just spew out a bunch of random bullshit. Keep it short, keep it simple, and, most importantly, keep it classy.'

"Are we, like, dating?"

'Are you, like, retarded?'

El frowned, as if she didn't understand the question. "What do you mean?"

Mike blushed. "Oh, okay, right. Um, well, you see...when a boy and girl like each other very, very much – "

"I know what *dating* is, Mike," El cut in before he could embarrass himself further, an amused smile on her face.

"Oh, thank god," Mike said, releasing an exasperated sigh and letting his head fall onto the back of the couch, "because that was about to get really weird really quickly."

"What I mean is...why are you asking if we're dating?" El clarified.

"Well, because..." Mike sighed. "Because of the kissing."

El blushed shyly, removing her head from his lap as she sat up to take the spot next to him on the couch. "Oh."

"Don't get me wrong, I like the kissing! Like, a lot!" Mike insisted, waving his hands in the air melodramatically. "I mean, like, not *too*

much, obviously, I'm not a pervert or anything, but what guy doesn't like kisses, right? Not that I've kissed many guys, I haven't actually kissed *any* guys, I'm not into guys, but it's totally cool that *you're* into guys cuz I'm a guy and that means you kiss me and I like that, I've liked every one of your kisses, they're amazing, and you're amazing, and kissing you is amazing, but now I don't know what – "

"Mike," El interrupted. "Just tell me."

Mike sighed. She was right, like always. No more beating around the bush.

"I like you, El," Mike began slowly. "Like, a lot. Like, *a lot*, a lot. You're the first friend I've had since I moved here and I love hanging out with you and having class with you and doing things with you. You're incredible. You're the *best*."

El swallowed. "But...?"

"But...I don't know what we are," Mike finally admitted, glancing away upon finding himself utterly incapable of looking her in the eye. "I know we're friends. But when you kiss me...I don't know if we're just friends or if we're something else. Something...more. So...I thought I would ask you. Are we friends? Or are we...more?"

There was silence for a moment, and neither Mike nor El spoke. Mike sat there, wringing his hands like the nervous wreck he was, while El looked down at the ground with a frown on her face, as though she was trying to figure out just what to say to Mike. The ball was in her court.

'Oh, god, what if she says she hates me?' Mike thought to himself, his one leg beginning to bounce up and down from the nerves. *'We were friends, we were totally friends, but I just screwed everything up and now she's gonna hate me and dedicate her life to destroying me and I'm totally gonna let her do it because I'm such a goddamn wastoid!'*

It felt like hours had passed before El finally spoke up, but Mike knew it couldn't have been more than a minute or two.

"I don't know," El answered softly, still unable to make eye contact

with him.

Mike looked back at her with a frown. "You don't know?"

El shook her head. "I don't know."

Something in Mike seemed to snap.

*'What the hell does **that** mean?'*

"But...but you kissed me!" he exclaimed, his mouth suddenly shifting into autopilot. "*You* kissed *me*! Like, a bunch of times. If either of us would know, wouldn't it be you? Why else would you kiss me?"

"I don't know!" El insisted, finally turning back around to face him and revealing her eyes were red with tears. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry? Sorry for what? Sorry for kissing me?" Mike knew his voice was getting louder and his temper was beginning to get the better of him, but suddenly he couldn't stop himself. He felt like he was confronting Troy outside the cafeteria again, all the years of confusion and heartache suddenly taking control of him all at once. His face was red and he was gesturing frantically, almost violently, as if he was going to explode if he didn't let it all out at once.

"Please, El. *Please*. I just want to know what we are! It's been driving me insane all day and I know it's gonna *keep* driving me insane until I get some kind of answer, it's just how I am, it's how I've always been! I just want to know what I need to do, who I need to be. So, please just *tell* me! Are we friends? Are we more? What are we, El?"

"I...I..." El sniffled, her lip quivering as she watched Mike let loose, red-faced and shaking. She swallowed again, trying to compose herself. "I don't know, Mike."

"If you don't know, then why the hell did you kiss me?!" Mike shouted.

"Because I wanted to!" El shouted back.

And then the tears gleaming along the edges of El's eyes finally fell, making their way down her flushed face, and Mike realized what he

had done. All of the anger and confusion and tension that had been building up in his chest and his head suddenly just evaporated, like it had never been there in the first place, to be replaced just as quickly by a tremendous sense of regret.

'Oh, shit.'

"Oh, god, El," Mike began, his face paling and his eyes widening as he watched El begin to cry. "El, I'm so sorry, that's not what I – I mean, I didn't mean to – "

He was interrupted by the sound of a car horn coming from outside, loud enough that both of them could hear it even in the basement. That could only mean one thing: Hopper was here to pick up El.

'Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit – '

Before Mike could even react, El leapt from the couch, leaving behind *The Hobbit* and gathering her things seemingly faster than the eye could see. Her backpack full of all her books and folders, she immediately made for the basement stairs, and it took all of Mike's less-than-stellar speed to reach her before she disappeared.

"El, wait!" he said, grabbing her by the hand. She stopped and stared at him, tears still gleaming at the edges of her eyes.

"Mike," she told him sternly, "I have to go."

And with that, she tugged her hand out of his and quickly disappeared up the basement steps. Mike made to follow her but, *of course*, he tripped halfway up and ended up falling face-first onto the stairs, bashing his (already broken) nose against the sturdy wood in the process.

'*Son of a bitch!*' he thought to himself as he pushed himself back up, his nose now openly bleeding from both nostrils. '*I don't even remember what it's like to have a nose that isn't broken anymore!*'

By the time Mike managed to reach the top of the stairs, he could already hear the front door being opened and then slammed closed, and he knew he was too late. A moment later, he heard the screeching of the Blazer's tires as it pulled out of his driveway and

disappeared down Maple Street, perhaps for the last time.

She was gone, and he was left standing in the middle of the hallway like an idiot, his busted nose dripping blood onto the previously-spotless carpet below.

'Fuck.'

Fuck, indeed.

Mike went to bed shortly thereafter, eliciting mixed responses from the other members of his family. Karen and Holly were both greatly surprised, Karen because Mike tended not to go to bed until ten at the earliest, and only because she had to badger him to do so; the thought of him *electing* to go to bed early, especially on a *Saturday* night sent up an entire host of red flags. Holly, on the other hand, was simply elated she was allowed to stay up longer than her brother for the first time in her life; she would konk out a little before nine, nonetheless.

Ted's response was mostly incoherent, since it was a snore.

Of course, unbeknownst to the other members of the Wheeler family, Mike didn't go to sleep. At least, not right away. He simply laid in bed, awake, lights off, eyes staring a hole into the ceiling above. He didn't bother to change his clothes or slip under the blankets or brush his teeth. He didn't bother to do anything. He just lay there. Thinking. Moping.

Trying not to cry.

Mike didn't know how many hours passed as he laid there, listening to the sounds of his family as they gradually wrapped up their own evenings and made their ways to bed, sans Ted, who remained in the La-Z-Boy, from which he would most assuredly not rise until Monday morning at the crack of dawn, at which time a shirt and tie would materialize itself onto his body and he would be off into the world, having once again successfully avoided spending any time with his family whatsoever since his last shift at work.

Nonetheless, hours did pass. The sun set, and the lights were turned

off, and the sounds of the house faded away into nothingness. And still Mike lay there, staring at the ceiling, tears stinging the edges of his eyes, trying (and failing) not to hate himself.

'I was right all along,' he realized as he felt himself finally begin to drift off into sleep sometime in the early hours of the morning. *'I really don't deserve her.'*

"Not yet," he whispered softly, his eyes closing as sleep overtook him. "But I *will*, goddamnit."

Despite his nigh uncontrollable anxiety, Mike demonstrated remarkable restraint and actually managed to wait until the sun was up before racing downstairs to the telephone so he could call El and apologize personally. Something told him Hopper wouldn't appreciate him showing up on his front doorstep at the ass-crack of dawn (the chief's words) just to make a heartfelt apology.

(Also, Mike had only ever been to El's home once before, and while he remembered the name of the street, he did *not* remember the house number, so there's that.)

Mike listened as the phone rang. And rang. And rang. And then finally clicked.

"Hello – "

"Hi-Chief-Hopper-it's-Mike-Wheeler-remember-me-you-totally-gave-me-a-ride-home-from-school-last-week-because-that-mouth-breather-Troy-beat-the-shit-out-of-me-and-El-was-super-nice-and-begged-you-to-drive-me-home-and-then-she-called-me-cute-in-the-car-and-I-called-her-pretty-and-you-tricked-me-into-going-on-this-huge-rant-about-how-beautiful-she-is-which-I-still-totally-meant-by-the-way-and-then-you-dropped-me-off-and-we-kissed-I-mean-she-and-I-kissed-not-you-and-I-wait-did-you-know-that-El-and-I-kissed-god-I-hope-you-already-knew-that-because-if-you-didn't-and-I-just-blurled-it-out-over-the-phone-I-am-so-dead-right-now-and – "

" – you've reached the Hoppers," continued the answering machine in Hopper's stern but somewhat confused voice. "Please leave your, uh, name and number and we'll get back to you as soon as we can, I

guess."

'Oh, thank god for that.'

BEEP!

"Um, hi, El, it's Mike," he began, this time speaking much more slowly. "I know it's early, but I just wanted to call and apologize because I know I was a total idiot last night and I really want to see you so I can apologize in person. If that's okay, I mean. So, um, yeah. Bye."

Mike hung up the phone and, to his credit, managed to wait an entire thirty seconds before calling again. As with before, the phone on the other end rang several times, and then went to the answering machine.

"Uh, hey, it's Mike. I forgot to mention this is Mike Wheeler, by the way. You know, from school. Because I don't know how many Mikes you know, but it might be a lot, so I figured I should be more specific if you're ever gonna call me back. So...yeah. I'll try again later. Bye."

Later turned out to be another thirty seconds.

"Hey, so, I figured I should apologize for calling so early, because now that I look outside I'm realizing it's like really, *really* early, like the sun is barely even up, and it's Sunday, and you're probably still asleep. So...sorry about that. I miss you. Bye."

'I miss you?!'

He hung up, realized what he said with a groan, and called again.

"Hi, Mike again, so I know I said I miss you right before I hung up last time and I just want to be clear that I didn't mean that in, like, a romantic way. Totally platonic. Uh, unless you *want* it to be in a romantic way? I'm...not really sure where we left off on the whole platonic friend vs. romantic friend thing. Wait, shit, that's what I got upset about in the first place, isn't it? Goddamn it. Anyway, call me back."

He managed to go a whole two minutes before calling again.

"Me again! So I just realized you might not know what 'platonic' means, since you just started school and everything. Not that I'm saying you're dumb, just that you might not have heard the word before! Anyway, it's named after this old Greek guy Plato, who...had a lot of friends, I guess? You know, I'm not really sure, myself. I'll look it up and get back to you. Bye!"

Another five minutes later:

"Hey, so, I couldn't find anything about that Plato guy, but I *did* realize I totally cursed about two messages back, and I wanted to call back and apologize. Chief Hopper, if you're listening to this, I apologize for cursing. I know I really shouldn't be cursing over the phone. Or at all. Please don't tell my mom. She will literally kill me."

Less than a minute later:

"Mike again. I didn't mean what I said about my mom, she would never, ever hurt me, so please don't arrest her! Thanks. I'll, um...bye!"

Mike finally stopped calling after about the eleventh or twelfth message, promising the answering machine (who, he believed, had been remarkably patient with him up to that point, all things considered) that he wouldn't call again for *at least* another hour.

True to his word, Mike waited a full sixty minutes before calling again, letting it ring, and then leaving yet another message.

He did the same thing an hour later.

And an hour after that.

And an hour after that.

Around two in the afternoon, Mike gasped when he heard the ringing of the phone cut off after the second ring as someone actually answered the damn thing, and he was so surprised to hear another human being on the other end of the line that he temporarily forgot how to speak.

"Hello?" Hopper grumbled over the phone.

'Good lord, the man sounds like he just suplexed an Allosaur and took its lunch money,' Mike thought to himself upon hearing the police chief's gruff voice.

"Hello?" Hopper repeated. "Someone there?"

'Oh, right. Talking.'

"Uh, hi! Hi, yes! Hi!" Mike suddenly blurted out, now grabbing the phone with both hands as he pressed it up against his mouth and ear. "Hello, Commissioner Captain Sheriff Chief Grand Moff Hopper, sir, it's Mike. Mike Wheeler? You gave me a ride home from school last week and I've been hanging out with El and you actually just picked her up from my house last night, come to think of it – "

"Jesus, kid, slow down," Hopper interrupted, sighing deeply. Mike could practically hear him rubbing his forehead in exasperation. "I know who you are. You've been calling all damn day."

"Um, well, yes, sir, but you never answered," Mike reminded him. "Sir."

"Some people would take that as a hint."

'Ha! Joke's on you, Hopper!' Mike thought to himself. *'I'm too socially awkward to understand hints!'*

"Oh. Well...you could have told me to stop calling, sir."

"Let's be real, kid, you wouldn't have listened."

'Fair enough.'

"You want to talk to Eleanor, right?" Hopper asked.

"Yes, sir," Mike responded awkwardly. "I mean...if that's okay with you, sir."

He heard Hopper sigh over the phone. "Now isn't the best time, kid. I don't know what the hell happened between you two – and please, for the love of god, don't bother telling me, because I'm already getting sick of the sound of your voice – but she's pretty upset."

Mike felt his heart sink into his stomach. "Oh."

"Yeah. Sorry, kid. Best to give her some space. You'll see each other at school tomorrow, maybe you two can talk then. That sound like a plan?"

"Yes, sir," Mike said sadly, his voice growing notably softer. "Thank you, sir."

"Take it easy, Mike," Hopper told him. "And stop calling before I tear the goddamn phone out of the wall."

Hopper didn't even wait for a response before hanging up, leaving Mike listening to the dulcet tones of the dial tone beeping in his ear before he did the same. He sat there for a minute, next to the phone, wondering what he was supposed to do next, and getting nowhere fast.

*'There's nothing you **can** do,' he told himself with a groan. 'Hopper said El needs time, so give her time. Just find something else to occupy yourself with.'*

But, try as he might, Mike just couldn't seem to get his mind off El. He couldn't finish reading his comic book, or even look at the copy of *The Hobbit* she left on the couch in the basement below. He tried watching *Star Wars*, but he couldn't focus, and found himself turning it off before Luke even left Tatooine. Even pulling apart the microwave oven piece by piece didn't help, though he was at least temporarily distracted by his mother smacking him upside the head upon revealing he didn't know how to put the damn thing back together again.

By the time the sun had set and dinner had ended, the only thing Mike had succeeded in doing was killing six hours or so of time. With the last of his dishes placed in the sink for his mother to dutifully wash, he made his way towards the living room, where he could hear his father snoring and his sister playing with her dolls. With a loud and obnoxious groan, Mike slumped over and fell to the ground until he was lying facedown on the carpet in the middle of the living room.

'Hello, darkness, my old friend...'

"Whatcha doin', Mike?" Holly asked, glancing up from her dolls and instead watching as her brother did his level best to melt into the carpet.

"I'm dying," he responded, voice muffled by the carpet beneath him.

"Why?" Holly asked again.

"Cuz I'm stupid."

"Why?"

"Genetics, probably."

Holly frowned. "What are...gen-et-ics?"

"Traits you inherit from your parents that help make you who you are," Mike responded, still as muffled as before.

"Oh." Holly thought about it. "So, you're stupid cuz of Mom and Dad?"

"Yeah."

"Does that mean I'm gonna be stupid, too?"

"I dunno, probably."

"That stinks."

"Yeah."

'And the award for Best Big Brother in all of Hawkins goes to...!'

"You don't look like you're dying," Holly said suddenly, poking him in the side as she did so, and leaving Mike to wonder why his little sister seemed to think she knew what a dying person looked like. "You look *sad*."

Mike nodded into the carpet. "I am sad."

"Why?"

"El and I got in a fight."

"About what?"

"It's...hard to explain," Mike said with a frown.

"Because you're too stupid to know how?"

Mike couldn't help but laugh at that. Every now and then, his little sister still managed to surprise him. "Yeah, maybe."

"Try," Holly urged.

Mike rolled his eyes and turned over so he was lying on his back, his face red from being pressed into the carpet for so long. Holly was sitting next to him and waiting for him to speak, still holding her dolls in her hands, but evidently having forgotten all about them.

"El and I are friends," Mike began, "but sometimes we do things that aren't things people who are just friends do. Things people who are in relationships do."

"What kind of things?"

"Things like...what your Barbie and Ken dolls do."

Holly's eyes widened. "You and El are *that* serious?"

"No, not really," Mike reassured her. Then he frowned, suddenly concerned. "Wait, how serious are Barbie and Ken?!"

"They're pretty serious."

'Clearly I need to pay more attention to Holly when she's playing with her dolls...'

"Look, it doesn't matter," Mike groaned. "I just got confused, okay? I didn't know if El liked me like a friend, or...like Barbie likes Ken. And I asked and she said she didn't know either, and I got upset."

"Oh." Holly paused for a minute and looked down at each of her dolls in turn. "So, you're mad because El doesn't know how much she likes you?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"How much do you like El?" Holly asked. "Do you like her like Ken likes Barbie?"

Mike sighed. "I don't know, Holly. I really don't know."

A moment of silence passed. Then another. Then:

"Mike, you really are stupid."

Mike frowned as he looked over at his little sister. "Wait, say what?"

"I said you're stupid."

"Yeah, no, I heard what you said, Holly. Why do you think I'm stupid?"

"Because you're angry at El for not knowing how she feels, but you don't even know how *you* feel," Holly answered matter-of-factly. "Maybe you weren't actually mad at El. Maybe you were mad at yourself."

Mike blinked as his little sister's words sank in and he realized, with a start, that absolutely everything she had said was correct. It wasn't El he had been mad at; it had been himself. He wasn't confused because of how El felt towards him, he was confused because he didn't know how *he* felt towards *El*!

'Michael Wheeler, you complete and utter airhead.'

"Holly, you're a genius!" he exclaimed as he leapt to his feet. There wasn't a moment to lose!

"I know," Holly reassured him as she watched him grab his jacket and head for the front door. Suddenly, something occurred to her, and she shouted it out to Mike as he left.

"Wait, does that mean I'm adopted?!"

It was nine o'clock on a Sunday evening, pouring rain, and El was upset.

After leaving Mike's the previous evening, she had spent most the rest of the weekend locked in her room, refusing to come out for any reason whatsoever, despite her father's repeated attempts to coax her out with Eggos. She had heard the repeated phone calls from her room all day, but ignored them all, just as her father had; she knew after the first message who it was that was calling, and she wanted nothing to do with him. Not now.

But now twenty-four hours had passed and Hopper was at the station until midnight and El hadn't left her room and she knew she should be getting ready for bed because she had school in the morning, but all she could think about was how badly she had screwed up. So, instead, she sat on her bed, dressed in her flannel pajamas, and listened to the pouring rain outside as it truck her window again and again. She looked around at the bareness of her bedroom, with its boring tan walls and plain bed sheets and its lack of posters and toys and knickknacks, and realized how well it reflected how she felt all the time.

Empty.

Try as she might, all she could think about was Mike; specifically, how angry he had been at her. He was supposed to be her friend, but...he had *yelled* at her. He made her *cry*. That wasn't what friends were supposed to do.

Was it?

She had screwed up, she knew that. She hadn't *planned* on kissing Mike so soon after meeting him, or that day during lunch after he shouted at Troy. She hadn't *ever* planned on kissing him; it just happened. He was her friend and she liked him and he made her happy and suddenly she felt like kissing him, and so she kissed him, but apparently that was the wrong thing to do.

'*Stupid*,' El thought to herself. That was why Mama had kept her in the house for so long, had kept her from seeing the outside world, or going anywhere, or making any friends. Because she was *so stupid*.

CLUNK!

El was finally forced out of her wallowing when she heard something strike her window, startling her and causing her to turn and stare at the portal. Either a particularly large raindrop had just slammed into her window, or...

CLUNK!

...or someone was throwing pebbles at her window.

El hesitated only a moment before walking over to her second-story window and drawing back the curtains. She squinted as she looked outside, doing her best to see who or what was throwing pebbles at her room through the torrents of rain, until she finally spotted the individual responsible.

Her eyes widened. Moving quickly, she undid the lock and lifted the bottom half of the window up. The moment it was lifted, El stuck her head out despite the pouring rain and looked down. And who did she find standing in her backyard, staring up at her with big, brown eyes and completely drenched to the bone?

None other than Mike Wheeler.

"Mike?" El questioned as she looked down at him, holding a hand over her head to try to keep the rain from messing up her already curly hair.

"Oh, El, thank god it's you!" Mike shouted to the girl in the window above, doing his best to be heard through the pouring rain. "I totally forgot which house was yours, so I've been throwing pebbles at people's windows for like half an hour now, and some of your neighbors have been *really* rude!"

"What are you doing here?" El asked, straining her own voice to make sure she was heard as well.

"I wanted to apologize for being such a jerk last night!" Mike shouted back, releasing the handful of pebbles he had been carrying around. "I know your dad said I should wait, but I don't want to wait anymore, I need to talk to you – "

"What?" El shouted back, cupping a hand around her ear. "I can't hear

you!"

"Sorry!" Mike yelled, now cupping his hands over his mouth so he would sound louder. "I said I wanted to apologize!"

El looked confused. "What about a disguise?"

"NO, I SAID I WANTED TO APOLOGIZE!"

"You have a surprise?!"

"NO, GODDAMNIT!" Mike shouted back, smacking himself in the face with his own hand before trying again. "I! SAID! I! WANTED! TO – *oh, fuck this!*"

Giving up, Mike wiped some of his soggy hair out of his eyes and stomped over to the side of the house, feeling the mud and water collecting in his shoes as he did so. El's bedroom was on the second floor, so he had quite a bit of climbing to do, but he managed to get onto the roof of the garage by standing on top of an unused trashcan he found lying nearby. Once on top of the garage, Mike shimmied over towards El's room using the gutters to balance himself.

Of course, Mike being Mike, physical activity wasn't exactly his strong suit, and he had only made it about halfway to El's window before he felt his feet begin to slide out from under him. Crying out, Mike threw his hands outwards, hoping to grab hold of the gutters to save himself from a very painful fall, missing entirely –

– only for El to save his rotten life by reaching out of her window at the last second and grabbing hold of both his hands before he could fall more than a few inches.

"Got you!" El gasped, already straining to hold Mike up and pushing against her own windowsill to keep herself from falling out.

'Oh my god,' Mike thought to himself as he dangled there in midair, held up only by the arms of the girl he had come here to apologize to. *'She's actually lifting me up. She's lifting me up, and I can't even carry my textbooks to class without stopping for a water break.'*

"El..." he said softly, looking up into her beautiful brown eyes as he

felt her hands wrap around his wrists and slowly begin to pull him up towards the windowsill. "You saved me. Even after all that stupid shit I said. You still saved me."

"Not yet," El said with a strained frown. "Hurry..."

A few painful moments later, El had managed to pull Mike up high enough that he could get a good enough grip on the open windowsill without her holding onto him for dear life. From there, El simply helped Mike scale the rest of the way up, finally grabbing hold of his back and pulling him through the rest of the window, accidentally sending both of them tumbling backwards into her room and sending mud and rain flying everywhere.

"Thanks," Mike said as he looked over at El from where he was lying on her bedroom floor, his very presence ensuring the carpet would never be the right color ever again.

El just smiled at him softly. Standing up, she walked over to her closet and pulled out a pair of oversized (dry) sweaters, no doubt hand-me-downs from her father. The largest of these she tossed to Mike, indicating she wanted him to put it on.

"Turn," she told him.

Mike blinked as he made to stand up. "What?"

"Turn," El repeated, lifting her flannel shirt slightly. "Change."

Mike blushed. "Oh! Oh, right! Yeah!"

And with that, he obediently turned away in order to remove his drenched shirt and jacket before pulling on the sweater El had given him. There wasn't anything he could do about his jeans, so he would just have to wait for them to dry. Finally changed, he remained facing away from El, waiting for her to tell him when she was ready.

"Okay," she finally told him.

Mike turned around to find El standing across from him, her flannel shirt now replaced by the sweater she had pulled out of her closet and a shy smile on her face.

"Hi," Mike said lamely, his face still red.

"Hi," El responded, her smile growing just a little.

Mike sighed, scratching the back of his head awkwardly as he tried to figure out where to begin. "So, um...I guess I have some explaining to do, huh?

El nodded and sat down on top of her bed, waiting patiently for her explanation. Mike just sighed again, before taking a deep breath. This was going to be a long one.

"So, what I was saying outside was...I'm sorry," Mike began, fidgeting slightly as he spoke. "That's why I came here, to apologize. And I understand if you don't want to accept my apology, especially after I was such a jerk last night. God, 'jerk' doesn't even begin to describe it, I was a wastoid, a jackass, a...a..."

"Mouth-breather," El finished for him.

And, despite everything, Mike smiled. "Yeah. Yeah, I was a total mouth-breather. I was confused, like I told you, but that doesn't mean I should lose my shit or be mean to you. I should never be mean to you, ever. You don't deserve it. I was angry and confused and I took it out on you even though it totally wasn't your fault. It was mine. And I'm sorry. I'm so, so, so sorry."

"It's okay, Mike," El told him, but he wasn't finished just yet.

"No, it's not!" he insisted. He walked over and knelt down in front of her bed so he could look up at her instead of the other way around. "It's not okay! And I'll tell you why. Because you're my friend, El. You mean everything to me. I've lived in this town for three years now, and you know what? I fucking hate it. I fucking hate it so much, El. But you...you make it *worth* it. You make it worth the bullying and the name-calling and the semi-regular beatings. Because you're there for me. Thanks to you, for the first time since I moved to Hawkins...I have a friend."

Mike reached up, taking El's hands in his as she looked down at him with eyes widening in surprise. "You understand, El? No matter what

happens, you're my friend. Platonic or romantic or whatever, it doesn't matter. It just doesn't. You're my friend, end of story. So long as I have you...I will always be happy, no matter what we are."

El smiled, and she felt tears stinging at the edge of her eyes. "Promise?"

Mike didn't even hesitate. "Promise."

And then her hands were torn out of his as she threw her arms around him and she was hugging him and he was hugging her back and neither of them was sure whether the dampness they felt on their shirts was from the rain or the silent tears falling from their eyes, but for several moments none of that mattered because they were back together again and that meant everything was right with the world.

"I'm sorry, El," Mike whispered to her over and over. "I'm so sorry."

El sniffed, her grip on his back only tightening. "I'm sorry, too. About the kisses. I'm...new at this. At friends. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. But...I like you, Mike. I like you so much. I couldn't help it."

"It's okay," Mike reassured her, likewise refusing to let go of her. "Like I said, as long as I'm with you, I'm happy. Nothing else matters. We're friends. Best friends. And...and maybe we can figure the rest of it out together."

El smiled, and he could feel her lips brushing against his neck as she did so. "Yes. Together."

And even though Mike knew he had school tomorrow and his jeans and shoes were soaking the bedroom carpet and his mother was no doubt wondering where in the world he was, none of that seemed to matter when compared to the fact that El was back in his arms and smiling and happy.

'Holy shit,' he thought to himself as he held the girl in his arms, 'I think I'm love with her. I think this is what falling in love feels like.'

Then the implications of that thought sunk in and he had to keep himself from groaning out loud.

*'Oh, sure, **now** I fucking figure it out!'*

A/N: Okay, so that one was a doozy, but I hope you all liked it anyway! As with before, updates will be sporadic, but stick with me, folks, we still have a ways to go!

Fun fact, I was originally going to have Mike stand outside El's window holding a boombox as part of his apology, but then I remembered John Cusack didn't do that bit until 1989, four years after this story takes place. But it's okay, I like this version better, anyway.

As always, your support in comments and kudos is appreciated!

4. Mike Almost Does Something Right

A/N: Thank you all, once again, for your unwavering support. I honestly never thought I'd write a fanfiction this long, but your comments and kudos help keep me going. And I'd be lying if I said I wasn't enjoying writing it!

Hope y'all are ready for some good, ol' fashioned hurt and comfort! This chapter, like the previous one, gets a bit sad.

Friday, October 4th, 1985.

"Mike? Are you awake?"

Mike groaned as a burst of static pierced his ears, along with what sounded like a distant but familiar voice, tearing him away from whatever dream he had been experiencing. He opened his eyes, almost expecting to find his alarm clock had come to life and was prepared to settle a score with him, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Wiping the drool from the bottom half of his face, he sat up and looked around, finally taking a moment to look at the glowing numbers of the clock sitting next to his bedside.

According to the clock, it was almost midnight, and that meant he could only have been asleep for a little over an hour or so, as he wasn't exactly an "early to bed, early to rise" type of teenager, especially on the weekend. As such, there was no way he had woken naturally, especially as he had experienced what he considered a relatively full, and thus physically exhausting, day: he had gone to school, hung out with El, successfully avoided being punched in the face by Troy, failed in avoiding being tripped into a puddle of mud by Troy, and then spent the rest of the evening chipping away at the mountain of homework slowly growing to Everest-size proportions in his bedroom. A full day like that usually meant he slept straight through the night until morning, if not longer.

'So, what the hell woke me up?' Mike asked himself groggily.

"Mike, pick up."

Mike jumped slightly, startled by the sudden noise, before locating its source and allowing himself a sigh of relief.

'*The Supercom,*' he realized, noting its placement on the nearby dresser. '*Of course it was the fucking Supercom.*'

Indeed, Mike's Supercom walkie-talkie sat undisturbed on top of his dresser, its antenna still raised and the little red button on its side still glowing, indicating he had forgotten to turn it off after he had finished using it earlier. He had owned the walkie-talkie since childhood, originally using it to communicate with the rest of the Party back in Montauk, and it had largely been sitting around and gathering dust as a souvenir until a couple of weeks ago.

Following their 'fight' three weeks earlier, Mike had used what little money he had saved up over the years from mowing lawns and programming VCRs for old people (\$5 to set the time, \$10 if they wanted the *correct* time) to purchase El a matching Supercom. It had been Part Six of his Thirty-Two Part Plan to fully apologize to her for being such a tool (though El had *rudely* forbidden him from following through on the rest of his plan after Part Nine had gone a little pear-shaped and ended with him covered from head to toe in glitter and chicken blood).

El had, of course, loved the gift, as it meant she and Mike could talk whenever they wanted without having to worry about potentially waking up one the other's family members by using the phone. In fact, Mike was fairly certain that was the only reason Hopper had approved of El using the Supercom at all, considering the sound of a ringing phone still made the chief's eye twitch and he spent a fair amount of his evenings going through and deleting phone messages Mike had left behind three weeks ago.

(Mike had tried to apologize for that, too, but, like his daughter, Hopper had forbidden Mike from doing so after witnessing the disastrous results of one of the boy's prior apology attempts. Mike didn't see what the big deal was; he had put the fires out, hadn't he?)

Since then, Mike and El had spent at least an hour or so each night talking to one another over the devices, sometimes launching into deep conversation with one another, and other times simply shooting

the shit while they worked on homework. While they still saw each other at school every day, the extra opportunity to talk helped when they were feeling lonely at home, and Mike knew El appreciated it considering she had thanked him for the Supercom every day since receiving it, and had even rewarded him with another kiss just the other day.

(Yes, she had technically promised to start kissing him less since their misunderstanding, just as he had promised not to pressure her into labeling their friendship one way or another, but that didn't mean Mike was going to *complain* when she kissed him!)

'But why is she calling me in the middle of the night?' Mike wondered as he yawned and began to get up.

"Mike, please."

If Mike hadn't already been getting out of bed to answer the Supercom, the desperation he heard in El's voice just then would have been enough to convince him. Jumping from his bed, Mike sprinted to his dresser as he grabbed the walkie-talkie and answered it as fast as he could.

"Hey, El, it's me, what's up?" he said much too quickly, already out of breath due to the three-foot sprint from his bed to the dresser.

"Scared," came the response from the Supercom.

Mike frowned, lifting the walkie-talkie up to his mouth again. "Did you say scared?"

"Yes."

"Scared of what?"

There was a pause. Then:

"Alone."

"Is...is your dad not home?" Mike asked, frowning again.

"No. Double shift. Callahan is sick."

Mike knew 'Callahan' referred to one of Hawkins Police Department's grand total of *three* registered officers, the others being Chief Hopper and Deputy Powell, the latter of whom looked and acted like he should have retired about four hundred years ago. Hopper must have been picking up the slack, and if he wasn't home with El by now, Mike figured he would probably be out for the rest of the evening as well, leaving El all alone in a house she had only called home for about four months now.

"Is there anything I can?" Mike attempted, carrying the Supercom with him as he walked back over to his bed. "Like, do you want to talk about it...?"

"No," El responded after a moment.

"What *can* I do?"

There was another pause before El's voice once again cut through the static: "Come over."

'*Wait, what?*' he thought.

"Wait, what?" he also asked out loud before he could stop himself.

'*Goddamn it, I have **got** to stop doing that!*'

"Come over," El repeated, her voice soft amidst the static. "Please come over."

Mike wasn't sure that was such a good idea. It's not that he didn't *want* to go see El; he pretty much always did, regardless of the time or circumstance. Plus, it wasn't like he hadn't snuck over to her house before; the chief was still blissfully unaware of Mike's sojourn to El's bedroom three weekends ago in the pouring rain, though he had to at least have been suspicious of the giant puddle of water and muck he found in the middle of the room after Mike left.

No, the problem was that Mike was a fourteen-year-old boy, El was a fourteen-year-old girl, and she was asking him to come to her house in the middle of the night on a weekend evening knowing her father wouldn't be home until morning at the earliest.

'Nope, nothing sketchy about that,' Mike thought to himself, cheeks burning red in the darkness of his bedroom. *'Just a couple of totally responsible teenagers totally respecting each other's boundaries while spending time together in the home of the GODDAMN CHIEF OF POLICE.'*

"I dunno, El..." he mumbled pathetically, already well aware of what would happen if Hopper happened to stumble in and find him and El alone together.

What followed was another long pause that made Mike wonder for a time if El had simply turned off her Supercom in disappointment.

'Good going, Wheeler, you totally blew her off,' he chastised himself. *'The first – and most likely **last** – time a girl has ever asked you to come over while her parent is away...and you blew her off. You are a living chastity belt.'*

But then El finally spoke again.

"Please," she whispered, her voice sounding so small it pulled at Mike's heartstrings. "I need you."

'Goddamn it.'

"I'm on my way," Mike answered immediately, fully awake now that he knew how badly El needed him to be there for her. "Want me to bring anything? Eggos? Books? Uh...motor oil?"

'Motor oil?!'

"No," El responded, her voice still soft and needy. "Just Mike."

'Don't question it, Wheeler, just do it!'

"Over and out."

With that, he lowered the antenna and actually made sure to turn the Supercom off this time as he began to get ready. He put on socks, swapped his pajama pants for a pair of jeans, and then pulled on a random sweater from the floor of his closet (after smelling it quickly and determining it wasn't *too* rank). A moment later, he was sneaking downstairs to the dulcet tones of his father's snores echoing through

the house.

Upon reaching the bottom of the stairs, Mike was careful to tie his shoes carefully and quietly so as not to wake his father from his slumber in the La-Z-Boy, not that it mattered much; a train full of circus clowns could drive straight through the living room of the Wheeler residence and Ted Wheeler would only wonder where the draft was coming from.

All Mike had to do before leaving was write a quick note to his mother, explaining where he was, just in case he wasn't back by the time she woke up. He scribbled it out quickly, read over it once to make sure it was good, and then taped it to his father's forehead on his way out the front door.

'Dear Mom,

I have left the country. Be back soon.

- Mike

P.S. If you are reading this, it means my handwriting has improved! Aren't you proud of me?'

Then, just like that, Mike was on his bike and pedaling down Maple Street as fast as he could go, his only thoughts on El and being there for her. It took just over five minutes for Mike to bike to El's home from his own, and, thankfully, this time he had the correct house number so he didn't have to throw pebbles at people's windows hoping for the best like he had three weeks ago in the pouring rain.

He brought his bike to a stop along the driveway of the suburban home and then left it leaning against the side of the garage, not particularly wanting Hopper to 'accidentally' run it over if he happened to come home early from his double shift. His bike secure, Mike ran back towards the front door and was just about to knock –

– when the door suddenly swung open from the inside and Mike felt all the air in his lungs burst out of his body all at once, as El threw herself at him and wrapped her arms around him in the tightest (deadliest) bear hug he had ever experienced, having evidently been

watching and waiting for him from the living room windows.

'She likes me, she really likes me!' Mike thought to himself as he fought to keep himself from fainting due to sudden oxygen deprivation.

"El...?" he wheezed lightly, trying to return her hug and escape it at the same time. "Can't breathe..."

"Sorry!" El said softly as she suddenly pulled back, allowing Mike to finally inhale once again.

Now that Mike could see her, he noticed her eyes were red and wet, and the sleeves of her flannel shirt were likewise damp, indicating she had been using them to wipe away her own tears. The girl was clutching a stuffed animal – a lion, from the looks of it – close to her chest, and while anyone else might have considered such a sight immature or childish, all it did to Mike was break his heart further.

'God, she looks so fragile,' he thought as he looked upon her with great concern, *'like I could break her just by looking at her the wrong way. What's going on? What happened?'*

"Are you okay?" Mike finally asked, lifting his hands to gently grab each of her shoulders, as through trying to help steady her. It was impossible to tell how long she had been crying, but Mike assumed it had to have been at least an hour or so judging by badly she was shaking.

El shook her head. "No. Not okay. Scared. Need you."

Mike took note of the way El was speaking, having heard her speak like this only a couple of times before. He knew El had spent most of her childhood – hell, most of her *life* – living in isolation with her mother, which explained why she often spoke so carefully and formally and sometimes even asked him the meaning of words she had never heard before. But he also knew how careful she was to try to hide that about herself, doing her best to only ever speak in complete sentences, lest someone else notice and begin to poke and prod and question.

But this, speaking in jumpy, one-word statements...this meant

something else. El only ever did that when she was upset or emotional or (as he was just learning now) afraid, when her mind was otherwise occupied and thus could not take the time to form the proper sentences in her head before speaking them aloud.

'She really does need my help.'

Without another word, Mike reached down and took El's free hand in his. "Come on, let's go inside."

With the front door closed and locked behind them, and Mike's shoes deposited nearby, El led him up the stairs and back into her room. Though Mike had spent quite a few afternoons at the Hopper residence over the last month or so, going into El's room still felt like he was trespassing somehow, like he was going into a place where he instinctively *knew* he was not supposed to be. He could practically feel Hopper glaring at him from halfway across town the moment he set foot in her bedroom.

El, however, didn't seem to care much for tradition (or else lacked the same fight-or-flight instinct Mike seemed to base his entire life around), judging by the ease with which she pulled him into her room and towards her bed. Once there, she just stood at the foot of the bed and stared at him, hugging her stuffed lion to her chest.

"So, um...what do you need me to do?" Mike asked uncertainly.

El took a deep breath, and Mike wasn't sure whether she was doing so to build her confidence or to fight back another sob. "I...I need you to hold me."

'RED ALERT! RED ALERT! ABORT MISSION!'

Mike gulped. "You want me to...hold you?"

El nodded.

"In your bed?"

Another nod.

'I REPEAT: ABORT MISSION!'

"But, um..." Mike trailed off. "What about your dad? I mean, if he catches us, like, in the same bed...I'm dead. Like, super dead. He'll kill me like eighteen different times just to make sure I don't return as some kinda shitty messiah or something."

El shook her head impatiently. "He won't. I won't let him."

And, though El was no taller than 5'3" on her best day and probably weighed ninety pounds only when she was carrying an eighty-pound bag of mulch, Mike somehow believed her.

'Ah, what the hell, I've had a good life,' Mike thought to himself as he walked over and sat down on El's bed, heart pounding in his chest. *'Okay, that's a goddamn lie, my life has sucked so hard it practically has its own gravitational field.'*

Mike's quality of life notwithstanding, El joined him on the bed a second later and motioned for him to lay down under the covers with her. Mike did so, to the great lament of every rational thought in his mind, but to the great delight of most of his adolescent hormones. His head had barely touched El's pillow before he felt her cuddle up to him, wrapping her arms around his stomach and chest and squeezing him like he was her poor stuffed lion, all thoughts of personal space having been thrown out the window.

'Sweet holy mother of Buddha,' Mike thought as he wrapped his arm around El affectionately, already feeling his cheeks burst into flame as she buried her head into his chest. *'This is happening. This is actually happening. I am in bed with a girl. Holy fucking shit.'*

He was pulled back out of his thoughts the moment he felt El shudder beside him and she began to cry again. For a minute, Mike didn't know what to do, and just let El cry into his chest, squeezing her eyes shut as tears flowed freely down her red cheeks. Her grip on him only seemed to tighten, though, so gradually Mike began moving his hand up and down her back in what he hoped was a soothing motion.

*'Okay, so maybe this isn't **exactly** how I imagined it in my daydreams.'*

El's sobs only continued to get worse and worse over the course of the next few minutes, and soon enough Mike had instinctively

wrapped both arms around her and was pulling her close, practically pushing her into his torso. Were this any other time, he knew, his hormones would have taken control and he would have been distracted by how the girl buried her head into his chest or squeezed her arms around him or tangled her legs into his. But right then and there, the only thing he was concerned about was El, why she was crying, and what he could do to help.

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked softly, speaking into her curly hair.

"Just stay," El answered after another sob worked its way of her mouth. "Please stay."

"I'm not going anywhere," Mike reassured her, rubbing her back as he instinctively pulled her closer still.

A thousand questions burned in his mind: what had happened? Why was she crying? Did this happen often? Was she having a panic attack? Was she sick? What was he supposed to do? Should he let her cry it out? Should he call the chief? Should he make peace with God before the chief came home?

'The last one. Definitely the last one.'

Mike didn't know how long he and El lay under the covers of her bed, nor did he particularly care; all he knew was the girl in his arms needed his help, needed his comfort – needed *him* – and that was all that was important. So he lay there and held her in his arms and rubbed her back and squeezed when she squeezed and eventually, *eventually*, the crying began to slow and stop.

"I'm sorry," El whispered several minutes after the final sob had forced its way out her, her face still pressed into Mike's now-soaked shirt.

"For what?" Mike asked just as softly, if somewhat incredulously. "For crying? Don't worry about it. I cry all the time. Like, *all* the damn time. If there was an award for crying, I would have won bronze, silver, *and* gold medals by now. Seriously, everything makes *me* cry! Fail a math test? Cry. Late to school? Ugly sobbing. Last issue of X-

Men sold out at the comic shop? You better fucking *believe* I'm crying. In fact, you know what I used to do every weekend before I met you? That's right – cry. Why, I use to spend all day in the basement wallowing in self-pity until I cried myself to sleep. Well, that and get my ass kicked by Troy. But mostly cry. Good times, good times."

And, despite everything, El began to giggle, and Mike knew he was doing something right.

"Thank you," El said at last, sniffing lightly. "I like when you talk. It makes me feel better."

Mike smiled, still rubbing her back soothingly. "Good. Because I honestly don't think I have the capacity to shut the hell up anytime soon."

That just made El laugh again, and Mike's heart fluttered as he felt her shaking lightly against him, this time from humor instead of sorrow.

"Do you, um...wanna talk about it?" Mike finally asked, the question having been burning a hole in the back of his mind all night. "I mean...we don't have to talk about it. We don't have to talk about anything. Or we can talk about something else, anything you want! I just thought because you were crying that you weren't feeling well so maybe it's something you want to talk about because talking usually makes people feel better, or at least it's supposed to, I wouldn't know, I mean, I would know because I'm always fucking talking, but I also wouldn't know because even though I'm always fucking talking I don't exactly ever feel any better after doing it, so – "

Mike only stopped talking (rambling) because El chose that very moment to lean up and gently kiss him on the lips, nothing more than a light peck, but enough that Mike's mouth (and his brain) immediately came to a screeching halt.

'ERROR. ERROR. FILE: NOT FOUND. SHUTDOWN IMMINENT.'

"To shut you up," she told him with a smile after his brain completed its reboot and his cheeks flushed a deep red in color. "And...you deserve to know. It's just...difficult."

"T-Take your time," Mike said, clearing his throat and struggling to rid his face of the blush that was still spreading across his cheeks.

'Yeah, take your time so the chief can come home and find me in bed with you and straight up murder my ass and mount it on the wall next to the head of the Triceratops that looked at him funny last week.'

"I get...bad thoughts, sometimes," El began, explaining softly and still mostly speaking into his damp sweater. "Bad dreams. Bad feelings. Sometimes I get scared for no reason. Other times, I see bad men, or monsters. I know they aren't real, but...they scare me, too."

"And you...saw them tonight?" Mike asked. He wasn't quite sure what to make of that.

El nodded. "Mama knew about them. Whenever I got scared, she would hold me and sing to me until I fell asleep. But...she's not here now. And Dad isn't here."

"But I'm here," Mike reminded her, giving her a light squeeze.

"Yes," El responded, looking up at him and smiling softly, her eyes still wet from crying. "You're here."

She buried her face back into his chest then and squeezed her arms around his stomach, as if reassuring herself that he was still there and wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. Mike smiled back down at her, practically resting his chin on the top of her head as he held her in his arms. Despite everything, he felt comfortable, even cozy, as though this was simply where he was supposed to be.

"Thank you for coming," El told him again, still speaking into his chest. "For helping. I know it's...not normal. I'm not normal."

"Fuck normal," Mike said, smiling down at her again. "Normal is boring. If this is strange, then sign me the hell up."

"Yeah," El agreed, giggling again. "Fuck normal."

And maybe it was the worry and concern he had kept bottled up in his chest all night, or the fear of Hopper arriving home at any minute, or perhaps even something else entirely, but for some reason

hearing El curse aloud for the very first time made Mike laugh harder than he had in days. El joined him a moment later, and soon they were simply laughing together like the schoolchildren they were, their thoughts no longer occupied by monsters and fears and angry fathers.

'*Goddamn it, I love this girl,*' Mike thought with a smile before the meaning of that statement sunk in and he felt his eyes squeeze closed in exasperation. '*Goddamn it, I **love** this girl!*'

"One more thing?" El asked. Her eyes were closed and her voice was soft and Mike could tell she was already beginning to fade off into slumber.

"Anything," he told her. It was the truth.

"Sing to me?"

'*Shit.*'

"Uh, what song?"

"Anything. Just sing"

Mike frowned and thought to himself for a moment, resuming his rubbing of El's back as he tried to think of something – *anything* – to sing. Problem was, Mike Wheeler wasn't much of a singer. He was more of a listener. And even then, there were very few bands and even fewer songs he actually knew the lyrics to. It took a minute, but one song finally popped into his head, and he decided to go with it.

'*No, no, you are **not** going to sing that,*' the sensible part of his brain told him. '*Don't you fucking **dare** –*'

"Make his fight on the hill in the early day," Mike began to sing softly, altering his voice so he could do a remarkably poor job of imitating James Hetfield. "Constant chill deep inside."

'*Metallica, Wheeler? You're gonna try to lull her to sleep by singing fucking **Metallica**?!'*

"Shouting gun, on they run through the endless grey," Mike went on,

his mouth (as usual) ignoring the advice of his brain. "On they fight, for they're right, yes, but who's to say?"

'Stop it. Stop it right the fuck now.'

"For a hill, men would kill, why? They do not know. Stiffened wounds test their pride."

'Jesus Christ, Wheeler.'

"Men of five, still alive through the raging glow. Gone insane from the pain that they surely know."

*'The entire fucking point of Metallica is the guitar solos, asshole! No one gives a shit about the lyrics! Why the hell do you even **know** the lyrics? Everyone knows it's all about the instrumentals!'*

"Doo doo doo doo, doo doo doo doo, doo doo doo doo!"

*'Oh, you think you're **so** fucking cute.'*

"For whom the bell tolls," Mike continued. "Time marches on. For whom the bell tolls."

*'There, fine, good, you got it out of your system. You finished the first half of the song, even the chorus. You can **stop** now.'*

"Take a look to the sky just before you die..."

'Kill yourself.'

Fortunately for the ongoing war between his mind and his mouth, Mike's singing was interrupted by a gentle snore, and he looked down to see El had, in fact, fallen asleep in his arms, using his damp sweater and spindly chest as her pillow.

'Holy shit, that actually worked?!'

"Night, El," he whispered as he looked down at her, eyes closed and mouth open slightly as she breathed in and out gently, blind and deaf to the world around her as she sank deeper and deeper into the blackness of slumber.

'I should get up and go home,' he thought to himself, now that El was fast asleep. Unfortunately, she was still wrapped around him, using him as both pillow and teddy bear, and surely any attempt to move would awaken her, which was something Mike most certainly *did* not want to do, especially after having sung half a Metallica song just to get her to sleep in the first place.

'Then again, I am pretty tired,' he considered, realizing his own eyelids were growing heavier by the moment. *'Maybe I'll just rest my eyes for a bit, take a quick nap. That's it. Just a quick nap and then I'll be off and –'*

"Zzzzzzzzzzz," Mike snored, his mouth already two steps ahead of his mind.

'Oh, for fuck's sake.'

It was just past seven in the morning when Mike woke up to find himself looking into the eyes of the man who, he was convinced, had singlehandedly wiped the dinosaurs from the face of the earth.

He had been momentarily confused when he first opened his eyes, wondering where he was and who was wrapped around him before memories of the night before began flooding back into his mind all at once. Suddenly, he remembered everything: the Supercom, the bike ride, El crying, their talk, *their kiss*, deciding to grab a quick nap before Hopper came home –

'Ohhhhhhhh, shit.'

So that was how Mike found himself still lying in El's bed, with El practically wrapped around him (her head on his chest and her arms squeezing him like a giant stuffed animal), looking up to find her father – the *Chief of Police* – watching them from the open doorway of her bedroom, arms crossed and a single eyebrow raised questioningly, waiting patiently for an answer. Hopper looked like he had experienced a long night, if the dark circles around his eyes and the generally disheveled state of his uniform were anything to go by.

'I am so extinct.'

"M-M-Morning, Chief Hopper, sir," Mike stammered, his voice weak

and hoarse. He would have leapt out of the bed had he not been practically held in place by El's tight grip.

Hopper nodded in greeting, his face carved from stone. "Wheeler."

"Um...how was your night?" Mike asked, growing increasingly uncomfortable.

"Thankfully uneventful," Hopper replied, not so much as blinking.

"Oh. Good. That's...that's good. Sir."

"Yes. It is."

'Okay, good, you're not dead so far. Just keep him talking and maybe – maybe – you'll get out of this alive.'

"We totally didn't have sex."

'Smooth.'

But Hopper merely rolled his eyes as he finally entered the room. "That mouth of yours is gonna get you into some serious shit one day, kid."

Mike blinked and took a second to reevaluate the situation he already found himself in, quite literally staring *a man with a gun* in the face *from his daughter's bed* with his daughter fast asleep and *wrapped around him*.

"In all honesty, sir, if this doesn't already count as serious shit, I'm genuinely afraid of what would."

But Hopper just rolled his eyes again and sat down on the edge of the bed, carefully, so as not to disturb his daughter. Mike watched as the chief studied El's face, leaning over to brush aside one of her curly strands of hair, and he could have sworn Hopper's expression softened just a little.

"How long you been over?" Hopper asked quietly, his authoritative voice giving way to one of genuine concern.

"Um, since about midnight, I think," Mike answered after a moment. "She called me...on the Supercom. Said she was scared. Said you were at work."

Hopper nodded, not looking away from his daughter. "She was crying?"

"Yeah."

"She say why?"

"Bad thoughts. Bad feelings. Something about...monsters?"

Hopper nodded again. "I'm gonna wake her up."

Mike watched as Hopper reached over and gently brushed some of El's curly hair out of her face, which caused her to wrinkle her nose and begin to stir. A moment later, her eyes were blinking open and she was looking around, trying to remember where she was and what was going on.

"Dad?" she asked softly, still wrinkling her nose slightly. "Is that you?"

"Yeah, kiddo, it's me," Hopper said, his voice gentler than Mike would ever have guessed possible for such a large and intimidating man. El smiled, then frowned softly and tightened her grip around Mike, as if suddenly remembering he was there.

"Please don't kill Mike."

'Ah, she does care.'

But Hopper just chuckled and ruffled El's curly hair, causing her to groan and squirm beneath his grip.

"Okay, Mike gets to live," he told her at last. "Just this once. Now how about you go take a shower to wake yourself up while I get us some breakfast, huh?"

El nodded. "And Mike...?"

"Mike will still be here when you're done," Hopper reassured her,

smiling gently. "Promise."

That seemed good enough for El, who promptly began to get up. She smiled at Mike as she removed her arms from around his torso and sat up, and he returned her smile with one of his own, as if to reassure her everything was okay. Mike and Hopper both watched as the girl got out of bed and, stretching lightly, began to grab some clothes to change into after her shower. She was just about to leave when she suddenly paused in her doorway, as if forgetting something, and then turned around, walked back across the room, and bent over to give Mike one last kiss.

'Holy shit, she's trying to kill me,' Mike thought to himself as he felt her press her lips to his right in front of Hopper, who was watching with widening eyes. *'She is literally inciting a homicide.'*

And then it was over. El smiled shyly at him one last time before turning and practically sprinting out of the room and down the hallway, her cheeks aflame the entire time, leaving Mike alone with her father.

"So..." Hopper began, slowly turning from the doorway to look back over at Mike, whose face was growing paler by the second, "how long has *that* been going on?"

'Homina homina homina.'

But the chief just sighed. "Alright, come on, kid. I gotta get breakfast started."

Something about the way he said it told Mike that he was supposed to help, so he followed the chief as he led the way out of El's bedroom and back downstairs, where he immediately got to work putting together breakfast, which seemed to involve an unusually large quantity of Eggos.

Not being any good at cooking, and unsure of what to do without direct instruction from Hopper, Mike awkwardly took a seat at the table in the little adjoining breakfast nook where Hopper and El ate most of their meals, the two of them really only needing a small space to share on most days. A third chair had been added to the

relatively small table recently and it made Mike's heart flutter to think it had probably been put there specifically for him.

The sound of running water upstairs signified to both of them that El had begun her shower.

After a few more moments of shuffling around the kitchen, Hopper returned and carefully placed three plates of Eggo waffles on the table, each of them heavily soaked in maple syrup, and one of them (El's, no doubt) topped with a sizable portion of whipped cream and a strawberry. His duty done, Hopper took the seat across from Mike and began to eat.

'Good lord, this might be my last meal,' Mike thought to himself as he hesitantly began to cut into the toasted waffles place before him, *'and it's gonna consist almost entirely of Eggos.'*

"So," Hopper said suddenly, glancing up and looking Mike in the eye.

"So...?" Mike asked, trying to play it cool with his mouth half-full of sugary waffle.

"You spent the night."

'Please don't kill me.'

"Please don't kill me."

'Goddamn it, Wheeler, stop doing that!'

Hopper frowned. "I'm not gonna kill you, kid."

"You're not?!" Mike exclaimed, finally releasing all the tension that had been building up in his chest since he first woke up in one long ramble. "Oh, thank god, I really thought I was about to die, like, seriously die, I mean, I know you promised El you wouldn't kill me, but then you totally brought me down here away from her to witness it, and I wasn't so sure because, yeah, you're the police chief and everything, so you're supposed to be the good guy, but that also means you probably know like four hundred different ways to kill me and hide my body without anyone ever knowing and – "

"Enough!" Hopper interrupted, frowning out of what Mike swore looked like concern. "Jesus H. Christ, kid, do you ever stop to breathe?"

"Sorry," Mike said, slumping back in his chair. "It's how I cope."

"I know," Hopper reminded him. "With the fact that your life is a joke, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yeah, well, listen up, cuz this next part isn't a joke," Hopper said gruffly, straightening himself in his chair. "I'm not gonna kill ya, Mike. If anything, I should be thanking you."

That took Mike by surprise. "Thanking me?"

"Yes."

"For sneaking over here in the middle of the night without telling you to see your daughter and then end up sleeping in the same bed as her?"

*'Well, if he wasn't gonna kill you before, he sure as hell is **now**!'*

Hopper sighed. "Look, kid, do you wanna live or not?"

"On most days, yes, sir."

"Alright, then listen," Hopper began again. "The reason I am *thanking* you is because, if what you're telling me is true – and I got no reason to doubt you – then you did exactly what you were supposed to do last night."

"I did?"

"You did," the chief reiterated. He paused for a moment before continuing. "Look, what I'm about to tell you...it doesn't leave this house, you understand me? It stays between you and me and Eleanor. No one else. You got that?"

"Of course," Mike said, meaning every word. "Promise."

Hopper nodded. "Okay. Well, I'm no good at this kinda thing, so I'm just gonna come right out and say it, alright? El's sick, Mike."

Mike felt his heart sink into his stomach. "Sick? Sick, how?"

"Not like that," Hopper reassured him, evidently sensing the fear and apprehension washing over the young man. He lifted a finger and tapped the side of his head, as if to demonstrate. "Up here, kid. She's sick up here. You understand me?"

Mike nodded slowly.

"She sees things," Hopper continued to explain. "Hears things. Not all the time, nothing like that. She isn't crazy. But she has fits sometimes, episodes, and she gets scared. It's only happened twice – well, three times, now – since I've known her, but...it can get pretty bad. I think you know what I'm talking about."

Mike nodded again, seemingly unable to speak.

"The doctors say she's had them her whole life," the chief went on. "It's probably why her mother kept her locked up the way she did. Hell, she probably *inherited* it from her mother, or at least *learned* it from her. She tell you about her mother?"

"Yeah," Mike affirmed. "She said her mom wouldn't let her go outside or go to school. And then she got really sick."

Now it was Hopper's turn to nod. "That's the broad strokes version, yeah. Except that woman's been sick for a *real* long time, if you catch my drift."

Mike did. His grandmother had passed away a year or so before his family moved to Hawkins, from cancer, and he remembered how impossibly *long* it had taken. She just seemed to get worse and worse, for months and months, and towards the end she didn't even recognize Mike or any of the other members of the family. El's mother sounded a lot like that.

"My point is...you were there for her when I couldn't be, and I appreciate that," Hopper finally said, grimacing slightly as though it were hard for him to admit. He took a deep breath and sat back in his

chair. "You know I used to have a daughter, before El? Back in Chicago?"

"I've heard rumors," Mike said with a shrug. He'd never really paid any attention to rumors.

"Sara," Hopper told him softly, and with great difficulty. "My little girl. She passed away. About five years ago now. Cancer."

'Jesus.'

"I'm sorry," Mike said with genuine regret.

"Yeah, me too," Hopper said with a sigh. "It, uh...pretty much ended my marriage. Ended a lot of things, actually. I did a lot of smoking, a lot of drinking, lost my job. Finally, came here, tried to pick up the pieces. And then, four months ago...she came into my life. The daughter I didn't even know I had."

Mike could see the pain in the chief's eyes as he spoke, and he could even spy what he believed to be tears if he looked just right. But most importantly, he could *feel* the chief's pain, hear in his voice, the way he spoke not just of Sara, but of El, as if he was afraid of losing her, too.

"You love her," Mike said, as though stating a simple fact. "El, I mean."

"So much," Hopper said softly, nodding, and Mike was sure he saw tears in the man's eyes this time. "She's my second chance, kid. To do it right. To do *something* right."

The chief cleared his throat before he spoke again, carefully wiping the tears from the edges of his eyes before they could dare fall. "But she's gonna need our help, Mike. Yours and mine, for when I can't be there. I don't know if you realize it, but last night, her asking you to come over? That was a big deal. She trusts you, kid. She trusts you to be there for her. And, at your age...that's asking a whole lot."

'That's what this is really about,' Mike realized with a start. *'He's afraid I'm not ready. He's afraid I'm gonna bail. He's afraid this is too much for me, that I can't handle it, that I'm just gonna abandon El and leave her*

alone to deal with all this. He's afraid that I'm gonna break her heart.'

'Well, fuck that.'

"I'm not going anywhere," Mike reassured the chief with all the confidence he could muster. "I know I can be stupid and annoying and I never know when to shut the hell up, but...I care about her, too. She's my friend. Maybe more than my friend, I dunno. But I promise I'll be here for her, for as long as she wants me. I promise."

And, despite everything, Hopper smiled at him. "You're alright, Wheeler."

A moment later, both of them looked up as they heard the running water on the second floor of the house came to an abrupt stop, which could only mean that El had finished with her shower. Any minute now, she would be coming down the stairs and make her way into the breakfast nook, where she would sit with Mike and Hopper and laugh at their antics as she stuffed her face full of toasted waffle.

"Oh, and Mike?" Hopper asked as he stood up and began making his way to the other side of the table. "One last thing."

"Yeah?" Mike asked, gulping slightly as Hopper stopped directly behind him and then leaned down next to him, so close he could feel the chief's breath in his ear.

"If I ever catch you in her bed again, kid, I'll fucking kill you."

'Fair enough.'

A/N: So, what do you think? Not the funniest chapter, perhaps, but hopefully the fluff makes up for it. Expect a lot more comedy in the next chapter!

The 'lullaby' Mike sings for El is "For Whom the Bell Tolls," which *Metallica* released in August of 1985, providing just enough time for Mike to hear it, memorize it, and perform a particularly inappropriate rendition of it.

As always, your kudos and comments sustain me, so keep 'em coming!

5. Mike Goes To Hell

A/N: Hooooooooo boy, this one was a doozy. Prepare for some wacky hijinks ahead!

Monday, October 14th, 1985.

"Uuuuuuuuuggghhh," Mike groaned loudly as he finally made it to his locker, slumping against it with all the grace of a slug in heat.

It had been a long day.

The bell had rung only moments ago, freeing him from the torment that was U.S. History class and signaling the beginning of the day's lunch period, but already Mike felt as though all vitality had been drained from his body. It didn't help that it was a Monday, which generally meant he wasn't even fully conscious until third period or so at the earliest. Add to that the litany of teasing and name-calling and general bullying that accompanied his every waking moment, and Mike was just about ready to write off high school as a loss and pursue a riveting career in something that didn't require a secondary education, like pizza delivery, or the presidency.

But that wasn't what had Mike so exhausted – well, all of it certainly played a part, but none of them was the *primary reason* for his long day. No, Mike's day had seemed so long and fruitless not because of the bullying or the classes or the fact he was barely a functional human being on the best of days, much less a Monday, but because there was something he had been meaning to do for *several* days now, but had continuously failed to do.

Homecoming was next Saturday, October 26th, and, while Mike literally could not have cared any less about the eponymous football game everybody else in school was getting so psyched up about, he *was* looking forward to the dance. Specifically, because he was hoping to ask El to be his date.

That's right, not only did Mike Wheeler *want* to attend a school dance, but he wanted to do so with a *girl* at his side. On a completely unrelated note, Hell was reporting record low temperatures.

'Now if only I can find a way to ask El without embarrassing myself,' Mike thought to himself, groaning again as he slid farther down his own locker, his face still slumped up against the cold metal as the other students passed him by with strange looks.

Mike had never asked a girl to a dance before, so he wanted it to be memorable. More than that, he wanted it to be *perfect*, especially for El, whom he was 79% sure he was madly in love with. The only problem was Mike couldn't seem to figure out *how* or *when* to ask her. It never seemed to be the right moment, and he never seemed to be able to get the words to come out of his mouth just the right way. And now, with the dance less than two weeks away, he was running out of time.

Hence, the long day.

'Why can't anything ever be easy?' he wondered himself as he finally straightened up and opened his locker, hoping he hadn't forgotten his lunch at home yet again. *'Well, look on the bright side. At least I managed to avoid Troy all day!'*

Indeed, ever since his confrontation with Troy on the second day of school, Mike was delighted to find the bully had seemed to lose interest in making his every waking moment a living hell. Sure, Troy still called Mike names and pushed him in the hallway and occasionally poured something disgusting on him in the cafeteria, but he also hadn't cornered him in the bathroom to beat the living stuffing out of him or eat his liver, which Mike considered a vast improvement.

'Maybe I finally told him off,' Mike considered as he began to put his books and binders into his locker. *'Maybe he finally realized what an asshole he's been and he's trying to improve himself. Or maybe he's just moved on to bigger and better things. Face it, Wheeler, you might actually be free of Troy Peyton once and for all!'*

"Hey, Frogface, guess what?"

*'I sure hope someone picks up that phone, because I fucking **called** it.'*

Mike sighed as he finished putting his things away and turned to find

Troy leaning against the row of lockers, watching him with an eerie smirk that sent chills running up and down Mike's spine.

"I dunno, did your mother finally tell you she loves you?" Mike asked, doing his best to ignore the bully as he searched for his lunch. "Because, if I were you, I would ask her to do it under oath, or while taking a polygraph. You can never be too careful."

"You think you're real fucking funny, don't you?"

"To be fair, Troy, you're kinda low-hanging fruit," Mike admitted, finally finding his lunchbox and pulling it free. He slammed his locker closed and finally turned to face him. "Now, was there something you wanted to say, or did you just want me to experience the nauseating effects of your halitosis firsthand?"

Troy frowned. "Hali-what?"

'Beam me back up, Scotty, there appears to be no sign of intelligent life down here.'

"Bad breath, asshole," Mike said with a roll of his eyes. "I'm saying you have bad breath. Now, do you mind? I'm sure there are plenty of other bullies waiting to give me a wedgie or stick my head in a toilet, and I would so hate to deprive them of that pleasure."

Troy chuckled as Mike pushed past him and began heading towards the cafeteria. He hadn't even made it ten feet before he heard Troy shout after him.

"You have no fucking idea what you're in for, Wheeler."

'Don't fall for it, don't fall for it, don't fall for it, don't fall for it, don't fall for it...'

"What are you talking about, Troy?" Mike asked, coming to a complete stop and turning around to face the bully with a questioning look on his face.

'Goddamn it, Wheeler.'

Troy grinned as he pushed himself from the lockers and made his

way over to Mike, his greasy hair gleaming in the fluorescent lighting of the school hallway. Mike knew he was trying to be intimidating, but something about Troy's lopsided smile and the way his gait reminded him of a gorilla with hemorrhoids somehow lessened the overall effect.

"You know what week it is, Loudmouth?" Troy asked now that he was standing right in front of Mike, his eyes widening threateningly.

Mike blinked. "Um...the week of the 14th?"

"Nah," Troy answered, before frowning slightly. "Well, yeah, it is. But that's not what the point. It's also the week before Homecoming week. And you know what means?"

Mike's eyes widened. Suddenly, he knew exactly what that meant.

'No...'

Troy laughed. "That's right, Frogface. It's Freshman Beatdown Week."

'No, no, *no*...'

"And guess who the football team chose as their target this year?"

'Nononononononononono...'

"Michael. Fucking. Wheeler."

Mike's face paled so quickly it looked like someone had erased it. There were still dozens of students walking to and fro down the hallways, either to lunch or to class, but they might as well have existed in another dimension entirely so far as Mike was concerned.

It was Freshman Beatdown Week. And he was the target.

'*Lord, why hast thou forsaken me?*'

"It's open season on your ass," Troy went on, now walking right up to Mike until the two boys were practically standing chest-to-chest and Mike could see the bloodlust gleaming in the taller boy's eyes. "And I may not be on the fucking football team, but you better believe I'm

gonna get my piece. Got anything funny to say to that, Wheeler?"

Mike gulped. "Mommy?"

"That's what I fucking thought," Troy replied. Grabbing Mike by the shoulders, he pushed him up against the nearby lockers, causing Mike to grunt loudly from the pain. "You're *small*, Wheeler. Always have been, always will be. You're *nothing*. But me? I'm *big*. I'm fucking *huge*. I'm the biggest fucking guy there is in this school, freshman or not. And now I'm gonna show you just how big I really am."

Mike frowned, suddenly confused.

'Is he coming on to me?'

"Are you coming on to me?"

Troy frowned, suddenly, and looked disgusted. "What? No!"

"Because I'm flattered, I really am," Mike went on unimpeded, uncomfortably aware of how close Troy was pushing him into the lockers, "but I'm just not into guys. Not that there's anything wrong with *you* being into guys! To each their own, right? It's just not my cup of tea, you know? But hey, good for you, man, really. Loud and proud. I totally dig it."

"I'm not gay!" Troy bellowed angrily, slamming the lockers on either side of Mike.

"Hey, man, you're the one over here looking into my eyes and talking about wanting a piece of my ass and showing me how goddamn big you are!" Mike shouted back defensively. "I mean, Christ, dude, phrasing!"

"I said I'm not fucking gay!" Troy repeated, yelling so loudly that he ended up spitting all over Mike's face and causing several passersby to turn and watch.

"Good cover," Mike said as he wiped the spittle from his eyes. "Your DNA is literally all over my face. Thanks for that."

"HRRGH!" Troy roared as he slammed Mike up against the lockers

one last time and then made to leave, shoving other students out of the way as he did so. "You just wait, Wheeler! You're gonna get yours!"

"Yeah, well, 'HRRGH' to you, too!" Mike shouted back as he watched him go, both shoulders still on fire. He looked around to find several of his peers still blatantly standing around and watching him. "Hey, did any of you happen to get the number of that asshole that just hit me? No? No one? Just gonna stand around staring? Cool beans."

It wasn't until the other students started shaking their heads and walking away that Mike let the reality of his situation sink in once more.

Freshman Beatdown Week.

'FUCK.'

He had been so caught up in trying to figure out how and when to ask El to Homecoming that he had completely forgotten about Hawkins High School's oldest and most horrifying Homecoming tradition. The tradition that descended upon one poor, hapless freshman every year in the week building up to Homecoming week. The tradition honored by every Hawkins High athlete going back a hundred years, if the stories were to be believed.

'I am so dead it's not even funny,' Mike thought to himself as he felt his left eye already begin to twitch. *'What do I do? Should I tell a teacher, maybe the principal? Shit, no, they're definitely in on it; hell, they probably helped organize it! Can't tell my mom, she won't believe me, she'll think I'm just exaggerating. Can't tell my dad, since it doesn't have anything to do with chicken marsala or investment banking, so he won't care. Oh god, oh god, oh god, I am so fucking screwed!'*

In the end, there was really only ever one viable option.

"El!" Mike shouted suddenly, startling several of the few remaining students left in the hall as he began making his way towards the cafeteria. "El! El, save me!"

El was getting worried.

She had been outside for almost ten minutes now, sitting under the tree where she and Mike always met to each lunch together (save for those days when it was raining or already claimed, at which point they would generally find a convenient corner in the cafeteria to hide in). She had been eating her sandwich and admiring the colorful transformation of the leaves in the branches above her as they swayed in the gentle autumn breeze when it occurred to her that Mike hadn't arrived yet, and that was odd.

'I hope he's okay,' El thought to herself as she reluctantly chewed the crust of her sandwich, looking around at the other students sitting on the nearby picnic tables and wondering if any of them had seen Mike. 'Maybe he ran into a mouth-breather on the way to lunch. What if he's hurt? Maybe I should go find him, just in case.'

She had just stood up to look for him when she heard the commotion inside the cafeteria.

If El had to guess what was happening inside the cafeteria based on the din alone, she would have claimed it sounded like a blind rhinoceros had somehow broken free from its restraints and was currently in the midst of claiming Hawkins High School's cafeteria as its new stomping grounds. She heard the sound of breaking glass and, though the windows of the cafeteria, saw at least one tray of food go flying into the air, followed by several people shouting, one voice standing out in particular.

"El! El, help me, I'm – oh, cool, are we having tacos today? El! Save me, El!"

Despite everything, El smiled. She knew that voice.

A moment later, Mike Wheeler burst out of the cafeteria doors amidst a din of shouting and flying food, covered in so much Mystery Meat that it looked like he was assembling it into a patchwork suit. Finally catching sight of her (she waved politely), Mike hightailed it straight for her, leaping past and over several picnic tables in the process.

"El!" he shouted, running so quickly he accidentally knocked over someone's soda.

"Hey, watch where the hell you're going, Wheeler!"

"You don't need the fucking calories, Delfino!"

And then Mike was skidding to a stop right in front of her, trailing ketchup and mustard and who knows what else, leaving a veritable path of destruction in his wake.

"El!" he cried one last time, falling to his knees right in front of El and taking both of her hands in his. "El, please, I need you!"

El blushed the second Mike took her hands in his, and she only felt her cheeks redden further as soon as he made this latest proclamation. "Um..."

Mike blinked.

"What?" he asked, as he began to look around, only to find absolutely all of the other students eating outside (and even a few in the cafeteria) were staring at him and El with wide eyes and bated breath.

It took another moment for Mike to realize the awkwardness of the situation he himself had created, what with him covered from head to toe in mysterious foodstuffs and kneeling in front of El with her hands in his and looking up at her as though she was the Second Coming of Elvis. Her cheeks were as red as red could get, and Mike felt his face growing hot as he realized everyone was looking straight at them.

"Do you *MIND*?!" he hollered at them, fighting the blush building in his cheeks. Sure, they were outside, and he had made quite a dramatic entrance, but that didn't mean everyone was entitled to stare! "Can't a guy talk to his friend in peace?!"

"Get a room, you two!" someone shouted from the picnic tables.

"I'll put you in a fucking *emergency* room, Delfino!" Mike shouted back.

It did the trick, though, and soon enough all of the other students were turning away and talking to one another, the Daily Exploits of

Mike Wheeler having evidently come to an anticlimactic end, leaving Mike and El alone to talk.

"Sorry," Mike apologized softly, letting go of El's hands and standing back up, clearly embarrassed. "I, um...I didn't mean for that to happen."

"It's okay," El told him with a small smile, her own blush finally beginning to fade away. "What's wrong? You said you...need me?"

Mike nodded furiously. "Yes, yes, yes, so goddamn bad. I need you, El, I need you, I need you, I need you, I need you, I need you!"

"For what?"

"For protection."

El frowned. "What?"

"It's Freshman Beatdown Week, El!" Mike exclaimed in a loud whisper. "Freshman fucking Beatdown Week! And I'm this year's target! Me! Michael Fucking Wheeler! And I am so doomed if you don't promise to help me! Oh, god, I can see it now, they'll probably corner me in the gym or in the bathroom or by the bleachers and just start wailing on me, it's how they always do it, they come in all at once like a pack of deranged hyenas or sharks or hyena-shark hybrids, it's the blood, El, they're attracted by blood, and I have *so much blood*, El, like way too much blood, I got blood coming out my goddamn ears, no wonder I was chosen to – "

SMACK!

Mike only stopped talking because El took the opportunity to lightly slap him across the face. He blinked furiously for a few seconds before turning back to look at her, one hand lifted up and resting on the cheek she had struck.

'Did she just slap me?'

"Did you just slap me?" he asked, dumbfounded.

'And why the hell did it turn me on?'

El just shrugged. "You were talking too fast."

'Fair enough.'

"Now tell me what Fresh-man Beat-down Week is," El instructed, frowning in confusion.

'Oh, right,' Mike remembered. *'She wouldn't know. She's a sweet, innocent little cinnamon bun who spent her formative years being sheltered and protected while I was out here getting my ass kicked every other day. She knows not the horrors of Hawkins High.'*

"It's...complicated," Mike said with a defeated sigh. Turning away, he walked over and then sat down under the solitary tree, letting the shade of the colorful branches protect him from the harsh October sun. El joined him almost immediately, sitting right next to him, and he looked up as he felt her take her hand in his and intertwine her fingers, squeezing reassuringly.

"Try," she said softly, a smile on her face.

*'Goddamn it, like I can say no to **that** face.'*

"It's a Hawkins High School tradition," Mike began, slumping back against the tree. "Every year, two weeks before Homecoming, the football team makes a list of all the freshman boys in the school and then they vote on one to be that year's 'target.' Then they spend the rest of the week trying to beat the shit out of him, and the first player who manages to find him and beat him up becomes Top Asshole or King Fuckhead or whatever. It's supposed to build comradery or some shit like that, but I'm pretty sure it's just an excuse to fucking kill some poor kid."

El's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Really, really!" Mike exclaimed, gesturing wildly. "I heard all about it from my sister Nancy before she graduated and disappeared into the ether. Every year they pound the crap out of some poor, unsuspecting freshman, and every year it gets worse! Like three years ago, when they chose Craig Murphy? He had to spend a week in the hospital!"

'Well, yeah, but that's because he got a staph infection or something. Probably not related.'

"Or Jerry Adamson the year after that! He got his ass kicked so bad he never came to school again!"

*'Because he **moved**.'*

"Not to mention what happened to poor Owen Jeffries just last year!" Mike crossed himself solemnly. "May he rest in peace."

'Owen Jeffries is still alive, Wheeler. Now you're just fucking lying.'

"Have you told a teacher?" El asked, looking suitably afraid for Mike's safety. "Hopper says I'm supposed to go to them if I have any problems."

"That's the problem! The teachers are totally in on it!" Mike explained, groaning all the while. "Like, the staff doesn't support it or anything, supposedly, but they all fucking *know* about it."

"And now...it's your turn?"

Mike nodded. "I'm this year's target. And I'm gonna die. Unless you protect me."

El frowned. "Protect you how? I...don't know how to fight."

"You don't have to fight!" Mike reassured her. "I kinda just need you to...go everywhere with me. Like, everywhere. All the time. Thing is, the football players are assholes, but they're *chivalrous* assholes, meaning they wouldn't dare hit a girl. Big no-no around here. All you have to do is watch out for me, walk with me, stuff like that, because if I somehow end up alone, even for a second...I could end up just like Owen Jeffries. God bless his soul."

*'Again, Owen Jeffries is **still alive**. You **just** saw him in History class. You lent him your pencil.'*

El nodded again, and then turned away from Mike, frowning from what he genuinely hoped was concern for his wellbeing, her brow furrowed in thought. She stared at the other students sitting at the

picnic tables nearby, as if picking out potential predators, wondering how and why they could sit idly back and let such a horrible thing happen to their classmates.

El didn't understand high school. She really didn't.

Finally, she turned back around and squeezed Mike's hand in her own. "You aren't going to die. I won't let them."

Mike's eyes widened. "You really mean it?"

"Yes," El said with a smile. "You're my friend, Mike. I will protect you."

The smile of relief and gratitude that Mike rewarded her sentiment with was so large and so pure that El almost felt as if she was looking into the brightness of the sun itself, her own face glowing red in response.

"I could kiss you right now, El, I swear to god," he said to her, his eyes practically lighting up with happiness.

El smiled back him shyly. "That might be nice. It's usually the other way around."

The rest of the day was...odd, to say the least.

True to her word, El dutifully remained by Mike's side for the remainder of the day on Monday, which was thankfully easy since both of them shared the last two classes of the day together, meaning there really wasn't any reason for them to be separated anyway. Now that Mike knew it was Freshman Beatdown Week, however, and that *he* was the target, he began to notice things he had been overlooking earlier in the day.

For example, he noticed how many of his classmates had suddenly taken to pointing and laughing at him in the hallways, or shaking their heads as they grinned devilishly, as if they knew something he didn't.

He noticed how some of the teachers (particularly the ones he liked) kept looking at him and then shaking their heads regretfully, as if to

say 'what a shame, what a shame, but such is the way of things.'

He even noticed how the local chapter of the High School Christian Coalition appeared to be hosting a prayer service dedicated entirely to the wellbeing of his immortal soul which, while very thoughtful of them, was nonetheless rather off-putting and didn't exactly make him feel any better.

Most of all, though, he noticed how every single football player in the entire school suddenly seemed to develop an altogether unhealthy interest in him. Mike felt like he couldn't so much as turn his head without seeing another one of the athletes staring at him from across the hall, practically drooling from anticipation.

'*So this is what it's like to feel like prey,*' Mike thought to himself as the last bell rang and the day finally came to an end. Nevertheless, El stuck by him all the way up to dismissal, and then he was free, having successfully avoided a brutal pounding for a single day.

The rest of the week was more difficult.

On Tuesday, the star athletes of Hawkins High School were irritated to discover that Mike apparently went *absolutely everywhere* with El at his side. She was there to see him off at the beginning of every class, and was right there waiting for him at the end of class, meaning he was always either with her or with a teacher. The two even ate lunch together because *of course* they did. Several attempts were made to ambush Mike in the hallways, but every attempt was foiled by El's presence, as none of the athletes especially wanted to be known as the one who punched the police chief's daughter in the face.

Things escalated on Wednesday, now that the football team had figured out Mike's strategy, and so they focused primarily on trying to separate El from Mike, or else ambush him at times when she simply couldn't accompany him. The players actually spent the entire day taking shifts in the boys' bathrooms, hoping to catch Mike unawares, only to discover Mike 'Loudmouth' Wheeler apparently possessed a bladder as big as his mouth, as he managed to go the entire day without using the bathroom even once.

(El had actually helped Mike sneak into the teacher's lounge so he

could use the staff restroom. Mike took the opportunity to spy around for anything interesting, and was disappointed to find the teachers evidently spent all their time in the lounge either talking to their attorneys over the phone or crying in the corner by the couch.)

On Thursday, the football players got sneaky. Having plotted out Mike's day-by-day schedule (or having bribed one of the secretaries for it), they took to hiding in spots they knew Mike would pass by, usually around corners and in the doorways of empty classrooms. On three separate occasions, Mike was ambushed by one or more of the players before El managed to run to the rescue and place herself between him and the players' fists.

"You can't hide behind your girlfriend forever, Wheeler!" they had shouted after El grabbed Mike by the hand and began pulling him to their next class, glaring at the players all the while.

"She's not my girlfriend!" Mike had shouted back, "and fucking watch me!"

"Can't believe you're using a girl to fight your battles for you, freshman," another had told him after unsuccessfully trying to trip him down a flight of stairs.

"It's called gender equality, asshole, look it up!" Mike had replied.

"Hey, Wheeler, stop being such a fucking pussy and just take your beating!"

"Shove it up your ass, Delfino!"

Friday finally arrived and, for one brief and shining moment, Mike actually entertained the thought that he might make it through the entirety of Freshman Beatdown Week without getting punched in the face even once.

And then History class ended, and Mike was mortified to discover El was nowhere in sight.

Every period, every day, Mike was used to waiting by the doorway of whatever classroom he was in for El to show up and escort him to his next destination, whether it be lunch or dismissal or another class

entirely. Sometimes it took her a minute or two, sure, but most of the time she was already waiting for him by the time the rest of the students had filed out of the classroom, so he was surprised when he found she was nowhere in sight.

Mike and El usually had lunch right after History class ended, so Mike wasn't worried about potentially being late; no, he was more concerned about making it to the cafeteria alive and in one piece.

'Where could she be?' he wondered as he peaked out of the classroom and looked up and down the hallway, searching for a curly head of hair or a pair of overalls or an oversized flannel shirt, something to indicate El was on her way. 'She didn't forget about me, did she? Oh, god, she totally did. She totally forgot about me and went to get lunch and now I'm going to have to hide in this classroom for the rest of the day!'

"You *do* plan on going to lunch, Mr. Wheeler, do you not?"

Mike turned around to find he was being appraised by his History teacher, Mr. Molotov, a large man with straight hair, sharp features, and a thick and distinctive accent which he claimed was Finnish, but which Mike was certain was actually Russian. That said, Mike was also certain Mr. Molotov was secretly a sleeper agent stationed in Hawkins as part of an intricate Soviet plot to infiltrate suburban American society, so perhaps his judgment on such matters was at least somewhat skewed by his father's politics.

"Um, actually, Mr. Molotov, I was wondering if I could maybe stay here for a bit?" Mike asked, now sweating profusely as he continued to look down the halls for any sign of El's approach. "I'm not all that hungry and, you know, I was really getting into that lecture you were giving us about the Gilded Age?"

"Ah, yes, the rise of the industrial capitalist pigs and their increased exploitation of the working class for their own economic gain," Mr. Molotov reflected, nodding sadly all the while. "Another time, perhaps, Mr. Wheeler. It appears my comrades – er, coworkers – require my presence for a meeting in the conference room. Off to lunch with you."

"Yes, sir," Mike mumbled, face paling as he was pushed outside of the

classroom and into the hallway. He watched as Mr. Molotov locked the door to the room and then made his way towards the front of the building, whistling a tune that Mike found eerily similar to that of the State Anthem of the Soviet Union.

'Shit,' Mike thought to himself as he pressed himself up against the nearby wall, as if trying to make himself as difficult to see as possible. *'I stick out like a sore thumb out here. I need to find some way to get to the cafeteria or the bathroom or **somewhere** I can hide before it's too late. Damn it, El, where are you?!'*

Unfortunately for Mike, the moment he reached the end of the first hallway and turned the corner into the next, he immediately found himself face-to-face with the football team.

The *entire* football team.

'Goddamn mother son of a fucking – '

"Well, well, if it isn't Mike Wheeler. And *without* his little girlfriend," said the player standing in front of the rest, who Mike vaguely recognized as the star quarterback Brett, or Brent, or Brad, or something.

(Mike wasn't exactly an avid fan of the school's athletics program. Sue him.)

Mike felt all the blood drain from his face as he found himself staring down the entire football team, all two dozen of whom were looking at him with cruel smiles and smirks. He had no idea how long they had been waiting for him, but clearly they knew he had to pass through his way, and now they cracking their knuckles and laughing to themselves in anticipation. Mike could practically taste the testosterone in the air.

'Does it smell like toxic masculinity in here, or is it just me?'

"You should feel honored making it this long, Wheeler," said Brett or Brent or Brad, sneering as he began his approach. "The team hasn't had this much of a challenge in years. In fact, we got so tired of waiting, we decided to skip the competition and agree to just beat the

shit out of you together as a team. What do you think of that?"

'I think you all need therapy!'

Mike swallowed. He couldn't even muster up the courage or strength to speak. He hadn't been this terrified since he woke up in El's bed to find Hopper watching him. Now, though, instead of facing an angry police chief, he was staring down two dozen of Hawkins High School's biggest, meanest assholes. He couldn't fight them. He couldn't talk his way out of this. In the end, there was really only one thing he possibly could do.

'You're only going to have one shot at this, Wheeler. Better make it count!'

"Look!" Mike shouted to the players, pointing behind them. "Free protein drinks and performance-enhancing drugs!"

Then he ran.

It being lunchtime for about a third of the school, and class for the remaining two-thirds, the hallways were essentially empty during this time of day, a fact Mike lamented as he sprinted down the corridors of the school faster than a gazelle on crack. Normally, the hallways were packed with students and he was able to lose himself in the crowd. Now? Not so much.

Mike had only been running for a matter of seconds before he heard the stomping of feet behind him, telling him the football players were in hot pursuit. It was only a matter of time before they caught up to him and subjected him to a fate worse than death. Fast as he was, Mike knew the football players were faster; they had to be in order to make the team, training day in and day out to achieve perfect physical performance. Mike's experience in running, on the other hand, consisted almost entirely of running *away* from people, and his instincts were about as sharp as those of a bloated sloth.

"Mike! Over here!"

Mike turned the corner of the hallway just in time to hear someone speak out to him, and he spun around for a moment before finding its source: El! The girl was peering out of what appeared to be one of the

building's many supply closets, and was motioning to him furiously, indicating he had to book it.

"Hurry!"

She didn't have to tell him twice. Taking a quick moment to ensure the football players couldn't see him, Mike bolted for El and only let out a breath of relief once the door of the supply closet was slammed closed behind him.

"Oh my god, El!" he gasped, struggling for breath. "You have no idea how – mrgwdnfbk!"

Mike's statement was cut off as El pushed right up against him and clapped her hand over his mouth, silencing him. She stared right at him and lifted a single finger to her lips, telling him to be quiet, and he nodded.

Less than a second later, Mike and El both heard the sounds of the football players running past the supply closet, all stomping feet and shouts and arguments over where 'that goddamn freshman' disappeared to now. The two of them stood in absolute silence until both were sure the football players had moved on into another hallway, and only then did El remove her hand from Mike's mouth.

"Whew!" Mike sighed, letting out yet another breath of relief once El had pulled her hand back. "That was way too close for comfort. Where were you?!"

"Some of the older girls cornered me after class and wouldn't let me leave," El explained, shrinking back slightly and frowning apologetically. "They were asking really strange questions. I think they were trying to distract me."

"Must have been the cheerleaders," Mike said, realization dawning upon him. "Ugh! No wonder those assholes knew I was going to be alone! They must have set the whole thing up! For them, that was almost crafty."

"I'm so sorry!" El told him, immediately pushing right up against him again and taking his face in her hands, as if inspecting him for

bruises or other marks. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

'Only my pride, but there really wasn't much of that to begin with.'

Mike laughed lightly, feeling his cheeks burn red from the attention. "I'm fine, El. Looks like you saved me. Again."

El only continued to frown. "I'm still sorry. I feel bad. I abandoned you."

"You didn't abandon me!" Mike reassured her, only smiling wider. "You just saved my ass! You should have seen the bloodlust in their eyes, El! If you hadn't found this closet, I would have been dead meat for sure. Buried next to Owen fucking Jeffries, probably!"

'OWEN. JEFFRIES. IS. NOT. DEAD. YOU. MELODRAMATIC. ASSHOLE.'

That elicited a small smile from El, at least, and that was enough for Mike. He was just about to speak up again when both of them heard the sound of the football players stomping down the hallway outside the closet once again, causing both of them to gasp and grab hold of one another.

"Where the hell could he have gone?" asked one of the players. "I know he went this way!"

"Fuck it, check the classrooms," came a reply. "Maybe he's hiding out in one of them."

"Nah, I'm sure I saw him head down the other hallway."

"Then go check it! Come on, man, we're wasting daylight!"

Mike and El continued to listen to the players argue outside the closet for what felt like hours, but what was in reality probably closer to a minute or two at most. The entire time, the two of them held one another, eyes wide and mouths clamped shut, afraid even the slightest sound might alert the athletes to their whereabouts. And even though Mike *should* have been paying attention to the voices of the players in the hallway, more and more he found himself focusing instead on El.

The supply closet was, by its very definition, not all that large, and most of the space was already taken up by cleaning supplies and mops and brooms. This, of course, meant there was very little room for either Mike or El to maneuver and so, for better or for worse, they found themselves largely huddled together out of necessity. Add to that the fact that both of them were hugging each other tightly, as if trying to protect one another from some audible but invisible menace, and suddenly things were beginning to feel a little... *awkward*.

Still half-listening to the players arguing in the hallway, Mike nonetheless found himself looking down at the girl in his arms, and he felt his cheeks blush red as she looked back up at him. For a moment, all he could do was gaze over her beautifully curly brown hair, her cute button nose, her big brown eyes, her perfect pink lips...

'*Oh god, her lips,*' Mike thought, gulping nervously. Suddenly, everything seemed to fade away: the closet, the football players, the entire high school, none of it mattered. El was the only thing that mattered. El, and her lips. Mike wanted – no, *had to have* – her lips. It wasn't a simple desire, it was more than that, it was a craving, a compulsion – a *need*. He needed her lips.

He needed *her*.

'*Jesus Christ, Wheeler, stop waxing poetic and just kiss her already!*'

So, he kissed her. Mike and El has kissed before, of course – several times, by now – but *El* had always been the one to kiss *Mike*. Of all the times the two had kissed, this was the first in which *Mike* had kissed *El*, had been the one overcome with emotion and want and *need*, and somehow that made all the difference to both of them.

'*Fuck football, fuck bullies, and fuck Freshman Beatdown Week,*' Mike thought to himself as he felt El kiss him back with everything she had, her arms tightening around him. '*This makes it all worth it.*'

Mike didn't know how long he kissed El for, but by the time he finally pulled back, he was just about out of breath. And then he heard her soft whine as their lips parted, her need for *him*, and suddenly it didn't matter that his lungs were on fire, because he

needed her *again* right then and there.

El didn't even have time to catch her own breath before Mike was kissing her again, and she was kissing him back, and soon Mike lost all sense of self and surroundings and pretty much everything except El's arms wrapped around him, her body pushed up against him, and her lips pressed against his.

'Oh my god, this is fucking amazing,' Mike thought to himself as he continued to kiss El with everything he had, his cheeks practically bursting into flame. *'Is this making out? Are we making out? We totally are, aren't we? We're totally making out right now. I'm making out with El. El's making out with me. We're making out with each other. Oh my god, why the hell haven't we done this before? We should totally do this all the time from now on, like all the goddamn time, like nonstop. Christ, this has to be, like, at least fifth base or something, right?'*

It wasn't until both Mike and El were completely and utterly out of breath that they finally managed to part lips permanently, both of them looking upon one another with red faces and shy smiles, but neither wanting to let go of the other. Mike looked down at El as she breathed deeply, trying to calm herself and catch her breath, with her slightly swollen lips and fiery red cheeks, and he swore she had never looked more beautiful.

"Pretty," he mumbled softly, but loud enough that she heard, which only made her blush deeper still.

"I...liked that," El said softly after a moment, biting her lip shyly.

"Yeah," Mike said with a dopey smile on his face. "Me, too."

The two just stood there staring at each other and holding one another for a few awkward moments before El looked away shyly and Mike cleared his throat and then both of them withdrawing slightly and pretending to nonchalantly straighten out their shirts. The hallway outside of the closet was silent now, indicating the football players had seemingly moved on.

"I'm...going to check the halls," El said after a moment, her cheeks still tinted pink. "Wait here?"

"Absolutely," Mike said, trying to fight back his own blush. "And, uh...be safe?"

'From what, jackass? The hall monitor?'

But El just nodded and smiled and then she was gone, closing the door to the closet behind her. She hadn't even been gone for a full second before Mike practically collapsed against the wall of the storage closet and began to hyperventilate.

'Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit, did that really just happen?!'

Mike sighed happily as he closed his eyes and let his head lean back into the wall of the storage closet. Sure, his legs were shaking, and his hands were clammy, and he was sweating more than he previously thought humanly possible, but none of that seemed to matter.

He made out with El. He and El made out. They kissed and then they kept kissing and then it was over and he was still in school and still scared out of his goddamn mind, which meant he wasn't dreaming, which meant it was real, which meant *it had really happened!*

'It actually happened,' he realized. 'I can't believe it actually happened. My face is red and my lungs are on fire and my heart kinda feels like it's about to explode, but holy shit that was amazing and the best part is it actually happened!'

"Mike?"

Hearing El's voice suddenly pierce the silence of the supply closet startled Mike enough that he accidentally knocked over the brooms and mops he was practically leaning on. After successfully righting them, Mike stood by the door to the closet and listened, just to be sure he wasn't hearing things.

"Mike?"

The voice was small and distant, but it was unmistakably El's. Mike frowned. Why didn't she simply open the closet? Maybe it locked from the inside? But then, why didn't she simply knock? Mike slowly pushed the closet door open and peeked out to find the hallway

completely empty. Where was she?

'Great, not only am I being hunted, but now I'm going crazy, too.'

"Mike!"

'Okay, I definitely heard her that time,' Mike thought to himself as he looked down the hall towards the direction he heard El's voice coming from. *'Shit, what if the football players caught her or something? She might need my help!'*

Thus, throwing caution to the wind, Mike took off down the hallway, following the sound of El's voice and being careful to ensure none of the football players were hiding around the corner waiting to ambush him. He turned the corner to find himself standing in front of the school gym, a single door open and the lights inside turned off, casting the chamber into darkness. And, of course, El's voice was coming from *inside* the gym.

'Oh, sure, this isn't ominous at all.'

"Mike!"

It didn't matter, Mike realized as he took a deep breath and entered the darkened gym. El was in trouble and needed his help; that was all that really mattered.

Mike didn't like the gym on the best of days, but standing in it alone, with the lights off and the sound of his lonely footsteps echoing off the concrete walls, Mike suddenly felt as if the room had upgraded from 'generally distasteful' to 'downright fucking creepy.' Nonetheless, he kept walking, straining to see where he was going in the darkness, until he felt his foot strike something in his path, and he cried out in shock.

It was a tape recorder.

'What the hell?' Mike thought to himself as he bent down to pick up the tape recorder from where it lay on the ground. He frowned as he noticed the tape within was being played. And that's when he realized the truth.

"Mike?" asked the tape recorder, playing back the precise sound of El's voice.

'Oh, fuck me sideways.'

Mike spun around as he heard the doors to the gym slam closed behind him, followed shortly by all of the lights flashing on all at once. He squinted, trying to adjust to the sudden light, and saw a single figure approaching him from the closed doors, evidently the mastermind behind this devious plot to catch him alone and unawares.

'No way...' Mike thought to himself as the figure came into view, causing him to widen his eyes in shock. *'You've gotta be fucking kidding me!'*

Standing only a few feet in front of Mike, and blocking him from the only (unlocked) exit in the entire gym, was none other than Troy Peyton.

"What's up, Frogface?" said the bully with an all-too-familiar sneer. "Looking for your girlfriend?"

'Troy? I got outsmarted by Troy Peyton? I fucking deserve to die at this point!'

"I told you, Wheeler," Troy went on, "I told you I'd get my piece. Football player or not, you belong to *me*, and I'm gonna – "

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on, shut the fuck up for a minute!" Mike interrupted him, turning off the tape recorder and then placing it gently on the ground in front of him. "This is yours? You set all of this up?"

"Yeah?" Troy snorted. "So?"

"Like...this is your tape recorder?"

"I just said it was."

"And, what, you spent like all week sneaking around recording El whenever she said my name?"

"Yeah?"

"And then you actually took the time to go through all the recordings and edit the tape so it just had El saying my name on repeat?"

"Obviously."

"And then you spied on me until El and I were separated and the hallways were clear so you could set the tape up here in the middle of the gym and turned off all the lights and left the one door open and hid back there waiting for me to come help El because I thought she was in trouble? Just so you could beat me up?"

"What's your fucking point?" Troy asked, clearly growing irritated.

"It's just...that's...for you that's really fucking clever," Mike commented, almost flabbergasted at the reality of the situation. "Like, I'm legitimately impressed. I always thought you were a total fucking moron, but this...this took some real dedication. I'm not even mad. I mean, shit, dude, if you put this much effort into your schoolwork, you might actually graduate before the turn of the millennium."

"Yeah, real funny, Loudmouth," Troy said, taking a step closer and causing Mike to take another step back. "Trust me, you won't be laughing after I'm through with you. I'm gonna fucking *destroy* your ass, Loudmouth. Those losers on the football team can have whatever's left."

'I am so dead.'

Then, suddenly, Troy smirked. "But you know what, Wheeler? Why don't we make this interesting?"

Mike frowned, sensing trouble. "Uh, interesting, how?"

"I've been kicking your ass for years now, but you've never once fought back," Troy observed, beginning to pace back and forth menacingly, his eyes glued to Mike. "So maybe, just this once, I'll give you a freebie."

Mike blinked. "Wait, what?"

"You heard me," Troy replied, no longer pacing. As Mike watched, the bully walked right up to him and stopped until he was only about a foot away from him and then thrust his chest out, in what Mike assumed was supposed to be an intimidating pose. "Hit me, Wheeler. Show me you aren't such a pussy after all, and I might let you off with just a broken rib or two. One free shot. What do you say?"

"This...this has to be a trick," Mike stammered, looking around as if suspecting someone to ambush him at any moment.

"No tricks," Troy reiterated, motioning to his chest. "Come on, punch me. Right in the chest, Frogface. Who knows, you might even hurt me. Bet you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

'I would like that,' Mike realized. 'I would like that a whole fucking lot.'

"So, come on," Troy egged him on. "Do it. Punch me. Before I change my mind."

'This has to be a trick, this has to be a trick, this has to be a trick, this has to...OH, FUCK IT.'

Mike didn't even realize he was punching Troy until his fist was already making contact with the bully's chest. He'd been contemplating it, feeling his hand curl into a fist, and then all of his thoughts had simply been swept away by a tsunami of anger and frustration and resentment, not unlike the tidal wave which had overwhelmed him when confronting Troy during lunch on the second day of school. Suddenly, all he could remember was three years of physical and emotional abuse, three years of bullying, three years of being treated as less than human, as if there was something so patently *wrong* with him that the only way for the universe to correct its mistake was to subject Mike to constant, never-ending torment.

Mike's punch wasn't powered just by his own (miniscule) strength, but by all the rage he had been harboring against Troy for three whole years of school. It was powered by every name Troy had called him, every wound he had inflicted upon him, every hurt feeling and missed class and stolen dollar. Mike put everything he had into the punch, determined to strike Troy so hard that he would knock the wind out of the bully and thus provide himself with enough time to

make a break for it. For Mike, it wasn't just a simple punch, it was his moment to strike back.

CRACK!

Which, of course, made it all the more disappointing when Mike's fist finally stuck Troy's chest and he immediately felt every bone in his hand shatter into a thousand fucking pieces.

"**FUCK!**" Mike cursed loudly as he withdrew his fist to the sound of Troy's triumphant laughter. He looked down at his hand, now red and swollen and with his fingers turning purple along the edges, and he literally felt tears come to his eyes. "Jesus, Mary, and goddamn Joseph, man, what the hell have you been eating? Fucking *concrete*?!"

"Nah," Troy responded between bouts of laughter. "I'm just not a scrawny little weakling like you."

Then he took his shirt off and tossed it to the ground, and Mike's eyes widened in horror.

'OH SHIT, HE'S FUCKING RIPPED!'

"Scared, Wheeler?" Troy asked with a sneer, cracking his knuckles in preparation. "You should be. You ready for the ass-kicking of your life?"

"If I say no, will you give me a few years to get ready?" Mike asked weakly, still tending to his throbbing hand.

Troy just snorted. "I think I'll start with your big, goddamn *mouth* this time, Wheeler. Knock out all your other teeth, or something. Then I won't have to listen to your lip ever again."

'*Fair enough*,' Mike thought with a gulp.

Grabbing Mike by his collar with one hand and curling his other into a fist, Troy was just about to strike when he was interrupted by a voice he knew very well by now, not least because he had spent all week secretly recording her.

"No!"

Both Mike and Troy turned (the former having some trouble, what with Troy still holding him up by his collar) to find El standing in the doorway of the gymnasium, glaring at the bully with pure hatred burning in her eyes.

'My hero!'

"Let Mike go!" she shouted, quickly making her way across the gym and towards the pair.

"Or what?" Troy asked, his fist still raised and ready to strike Mike at any moment. "You gonna try to talk me down or something? Or maybe call the chief on my ass, is that it?"

"No," El stated, standing right in front of him and glaring at him so hard Mike thought she might have been literally shaking with fury. "I'll fight you."

'Oh, god,' Mike thought, his face paling, *'now we're **both** gonna die.'*

Troy's laughter was so loud that it literally echoed through the gym, and Mike found it so frightening that it literally sent shivers running up and down his spine. It sounded like a porcupine joyously choking on a candy wrapper, and suddenly all Mike wanted to do was get as far away from the source of the noise as possible.

"You are gonna fight *me*?" Troy asked incredulously, his eyes wide with humor. "What are *you* gonna do, huh? You gonna punch me, girly-girl? Is that it? Didn't really work out for your boyfriend here."

"I'm not going to punch you," El replied, her voice strong and steady. "My dad says that's not how I'm supposed to fight mouth-breathers like you."

"Oh, yeah?" Troy said with a smirk. "And how *are* you supposed to fight guys like me?"

"Like this."

And, without further ado, El wordlessly kicked Troy in the crotch so hard that Mike swore he could literally *hear* the sound of The Powers That Be wiping Troy's future children from the timeline. Troy's eyes

widened about as big as dinner plates as El's kick knocked every molecule of oxygen out of his lungs, and even Mike couldn't help but wince in sympathetic pain.

Troy's hands flew to his shattered testicles the moment El withdrew her foot, allowing Mike to free himself from the bully's grasp. Still groaning with pain, the bully fell to his knees, bent forward in agony, and glared up at El with an expression of both shock and hatred on his face.

But El just glared right back at him. "Now I punch you."

And she did, curling her tiny hand into a fist and then driving it into Troy's nose with all the strength she had. Had he any air left in his lungs at all, Troy almost certainly would have cried out, but, as it were, he simply crumpled to the ground and whimpered pathetically.

'*Holy shit,*' Mike thought as he watched his arch-nemesis curl up in a ball on the floor of the gym and begin to cry. '*This might just be the greatest day of my entire life.*'

"Are you okay?" El asked, already forgetting about Troy entirely as she walked over to Mike.

Mike just smiled. "You ask me that a lot."

"You need help a lot," El countered with a small smile of her own.

"Jesus Christ, Hopper!"

Both Mike and El spun around to find the entire football team making their way into the gym, having apparently heard the commotion or else finally tracked Mike down. The exclamation seemed to have come from Brett, or Brent, or Brad, who was once again in the lead and looking down at Troy whimpering on the floor with a great deal of shock.

"Is that Troy Peyton?" asked Brett/Brent/Brad, eyes wide in disbelief. "Holy shit, you knocked him the fuck out!"

"And I'll do it to you, too!" El shouted back at him, surprising Mike, who wasn't sure El even knew *how* to shout. "All of you! I don't care

about Fresh-man Beat-down Week. Leave Mike alone, or else!"

"You don't have to tell me twice," said another one of the players kneeling by Troy. "Gross, dude, I think he pissed himself!"

"Yeah, I ain't punching no girls," Brett/Brent/Brad/Whatever commented with a wave of his hand. "Screw it, Beatdown Week is more trouble than it's worth anyway. Come on, guys, let's just go kick the crap out of that Jeffries kid again."

'Wait...what?' Mike thought to himself, blinking wildly as the athletes murmured their consent. *'They spend the whole goddamn week hunting me down, trying to kick my ass...and now they're just giving up? Just like that?! I'm almost disappointed.'*

His conflicted feelings notwithstanding, Mike happily watched as Star Quarterback Whatever-His-Name-Was turned and led the rest of the football team back out of the gym, presumably to go after the late Owen Jeffries.

"Yeah, you better run, assholes!" Mike shouted after them (but after making sure they were far enough away that they probably wouldn't be able to hear him). "She's my friend and she's a fucking badass!"

And then the football team was gone, and it was just Mike and El alone in the middle of the gym, standing beside the crumpled heap of what used to be Troy Peyton. None of the football players turned around to come back, the doors closed behind them, and Freshman Beatdown Week had officially come to an end.

It was over.

A thousand thoughts raced through Mike's head as he turned away from the doors to the gymnasium in order to better look at El, once again taking in her curly brown hair, her autumn fire brown eyes, the secretive smile slowly making its way across her face. All things considered, Mike should have been focusing on the fact that he had avoided yet another beating (two beatings, technically), and had come out of Freshman Beatdown Week completely unscathed. Instead, he was too busy focusing all of his attention on the girl in front of him and how absolutely incredible she was.

"El..." Mike breathed as he felt his face erupt in a big, dopey smile. "That...that was the greatest thing I've ever seen! Not only did you beat up Troy, which would normally be enough for me to literally explode with joy, but you also got the football team off my back! That means I get to live! You totally saved my worthless life, El! I mean, that was...that was awesome! That was amazing! That was... that was..."

"Badass?" El tried, returning his smile with one of her own.

"Totally badass!" Mike exclaimed, laughing loudly. "You're incredible, El. Absolutely incredible. You're like, the best friend I've ever had, and I totally one hundred percent mean that! I mean, I gotta call Will and tell him the bad news, but I'm sure he'll understand, Lucas too, I think I called him my best friend at one point, but that's okay because you totally outdid both of them! You're the most amazing person in the entire world, El! You're so cool and you're always there for me and you're a total badass and, and, and..."

'Jesus Christ, Wheeler, just spit it out already!'

El frowned lightly as Mike suddenly cut himself off and then cleared his throat loudly. As she watched curiously, he lowered himself down to a single knee and then took one of her hands in both of his, clasping it gently but possessively. She felt her own face turn a light shade of red as Mike fought to steady his breathing and then looked up at her with new life in his eyes.

"El Hopper," he finally began, heart pounding in his chest and sweat glands shifting once again into maximum overdrive, "will you go to Homecoming with me?"

For a moment, Mike was really afraid El was going to say no, at least judging by the confused look that crossed her eyes at first. But then he saw her eyes light up and her lips curl into a smile and he knew the answer before she even said it.

"Yes."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!" Mike exclaimed as he leapt back up and threw his arms around her in a

tight embrace. "You're totally awesome, you know that?"

"I think you're awesome, too," El said softly, smiling and hugging him back.

"I hate you both so goddamn much..."

"Shut the fuck up, Troy."

The question asked, and the answer received, Mike and El continued to stand in the middle of the otherwise empty gym for a few moments more, holding each other in their arms and swaying slightly to the sound of Troy's whimpering on the floor beside them. Finally, at long last, the drama had passed, and they were at ease.

"Mike?" El asked, finally breaking the silence.

"Yeah, El?" Mike answered.

"What is Home-coming?"

'Oh. Right.'

A/N: And there we go. I really can't tell all of you how much I appreciate your support with this story. I had no idea this thing would take off as much as it has but, well, here we are!

Kudos, comments, and reviews are encouraged, so bring them on!

6. Mike Gets His Groove On

A/N: So, apologies, but this one took a while. Taking a look at the length, I think you will see why!

Just a head's up: this story will be concluding after its eighth chapter, which means we are already fast approaching the end! I've had a pretty good idea of how to end this tale for a few chapters now and, frankly, I'm excited about it. That said, I maaaaaay just be open to the idea of including an Epilogue. We'll see.

In the meantime...prepare for fluff, because we're off to Homecoming!

Saturday, October 26th, 1985.

"So, just to be clear, you are taking a *girl* to Homecoming? Like...a *real* girl?"

Mike rolled his eyes. "No, asshole, she's fake. I built her out of spare parts and Cocoa Puffs for the sole purpose of accompanying me to a school dance."

"Mike, I know you're joking," Dustin responded over the phone, "but that's honestly still more believable than you taking a real girl to Homecoming."

It was Saturday, just past noon, and Mike was already regretting getting out of bed that morning. In fact, the only thing that had gotten him out of bed in the first place was the fact that it was Homecoming weekend. Normally, this would not have mattered to Mike in the least. He cared very little about school events in general, and even less about whether his high school (which he hated) won a football game against another high school he had never even heard of (but would probably also have hated, had he gone there instead). The only thing about Homecoming Mike cared about at all was the Homecoming Dance, which began at 8 PM sharp that night, and the only reason he cared about *that* was because he actually had a date to accompany him.

And not just any date: El Hopper. The police chief's daughter. The mysterious new girl. His new best friend.

'Sorry, Will. Sorry, Lucas. You understand.'

El had, just in the last two months since meeting him, helped Mike recover from a beating, kissed him, encouraged him to stand up for himself, kissed him, promised to always be there for him, kissed him, protected him from the wrath of the entire football team and his longtime bully, and even kissed him.

(Also, she totaled kissed him.)

(Like, more than once.)

(Like, *willingly*!)

Mike had told Will the good news last weekend (and at great length), and Will had sounded very excited over the phone. Too excited, Mike now realized, as he answered his phone a week later expecting Will's weekly call, only to be bombarded by the voices of the entire Party shouting at him all the way from Montauk via speakerphone. Will had told them Mike was taking a girl to Homecoming, and they had *insisted* on speaking with him the next time Will called.

"We just want to give him some pointers," Dustin had told Will that morning as they rigged up the speakerphone at the Byers' residence. "You know how hopeless Mike is with girls. And human interaction in general."

"Yeah, we're just calling for...emotional support!" Lucas had added with a smile. "Right, Max?"

"Honestly, I just want to make fun of him," Max said with a shrug and, while Will did not particularly appreciate the answer, he at least appreciated that she was probably the only one of the three who was actually being honest with him.

So, they had called, and Mike had answered, and he was already regretting it.

"How's that so unbelievable?" he exclaimed in an attempt to defend

himself, leaning against the counter of the kitchen with the corded phone stretching halfway across the room. "I can talk to girls! I talk to girls all the time! It's, like, second nature!"

"Your mother and your sisters don't count," Lucas responded, causing Dustin to cackle in the background.

"I talk to Max, don't I?"

"Max doesn't count, either."

"Why not?!"

"Because I'm still more of a man than any of you nerds will ever be," Max reminded him.

'Fair enough.'

"Well, screw you guys, because I *can* talk to girls, my friend *is* a girl, and she *is* going to Homecoming with me," Mike reasserted himself. "And she's fucking real, Dustin, so don't you get started all over again."

"I'm just saying, dude..."

"Just tell them about her, Mike," Will interjected, ever the mediator. "That's the only reason I let them come over in the first place. You're totally in love with this girl and I wanted them to hear it from you."

"I'm not in love with El!" Mike exclaimed, a little louder than he had intended.

'Yes, you are!' he thought to himself.

"Yes, you are!" Will shouted back over the phone.

"Yes, you are!" Holly and his mother shouted to him from all the way in the living room.

"Sssnnrrkk!" Ted snored, sleeping again.

'Fuck.'

"Okay, I *might* be a *little* in love," Mike finally admitted, groaning the instant he heard the whooping and cheering on the other end of the phone.

"I told you guys, I told you!" Will laughed over the phone. "Now, pay up. Five bucks."

"I really gotta stop making bets with you, Byers," Mike heard Dustin groan. "At this rate, my mom ought to just start giving my allowance to you directly."

"I fucking hate you all so much," Mike groaned, his eyes squeezed closed and his head in his hands.

"Don't get so dramatic, Wheeler," Max replied. "Now tell us about all about your girlfriend. What was her name again?"

"El."

"El?" Lucas repeated questioningly. Mike could practically feel his look of confusion. "That's not a name, that's a letter."

"It's a nickname," Mike replied with narrowed eyes, not that Lucas could see them. "It's short for Eleanor."

"Eleanor?!" Dustin howled over the phone, causing Mike to pull it away from his ear momentarily. "Eleanor?! Holy shit, Mike, I think my *grandmother* is named Eleanor! You didn't tell us your girlfriend was eighty years old! What's her sister's name? *Agatha*? *Beatrice*?!"

"Oh my god, can you imagine them holding hands?" Max interjected, soon joining in the laughter with Dustin.

"Yeah, to help her cross the street on the way to her bridge game!" Lucas went on, eliciting another burst of laughter.

"Guys? Can you not?" Will said with a sigh, but even Mike could hear the laughter in his voice.

'I am going to murder them,' Mike thought to himself as he felt his cheeks grow redder and redder. *'I am going to sell everything I own, bike to the nearest airport, purchase a ticket, fly to Montauk, take a taxi*

back to the old neighborhood, stop by the Mexican restaurant at the corner – god, I miss their chimichangas – and then commit a quadruple homicide with a goddamn smile on my face.'

"She's not eighty, she's the same age as we are, and she's the most beautiful fucking girl in the entire world," Mike finally responded after taking a moment to compose himself and give his friends time to stop laughing and catch their breath. "She's got short, curly hair and these adorable brown eyes and the cutest fucking smile, and she's a total badass who kicks bullies in the nuts and laughs when I tell her jokes and she always knows how to make me feel better when I feel like shit, which is good, since I pretty much feel like shit all the goddamn time, and she always wears these oversized sweaters and flannel shirts and overalls, which sounds really dorky now that I think about it, but she totally pulls it off, plus they're like super comfy, so they don't like scratch me or anything when she falls asleep on me or we're kissing or – "

"Wait, *WHAT?!'*"

'Ohhhhh, shit,' Mike realized, squeezing his eyes closed once again, *'I've said too much.'*

"Kissing? Did you say *kissing?*" Max asked incredulously. "You've kissed El?"

"Yeah?" Mike answered, slightly confused. "Like, a few times. Will didn't tell you?"

"Nope," Will responded devilishly. "Must have slipped my mind."

'You'll be the first to go, Byers.'

"You've kissed a girl?" Lucas asked again, as though for clarification.

"Yes."

"Like, a *real* kiss?"

"Yes."

"Like, a *real girl?*" Dustin asked *again*, causing Mike to groan *again*.

'I take it back, Dustin is first, Will is second.'

"Why is this so hard for all of you to understand?" Mike asked, his frustration becoming ever more apparent. "Look, I got my ass kicked on the first day of school and El was there and she helped me home and we became friends and started hanging out and spending time at each other's houses and sometimes we kiss a little and it's absolutely fucking awesome and I never want it to stop, but we're totally not dating, we're just friends, friends who kiss. Like, a lot. Sometimes. Oh, and sometimes I bike over to her place and spend the night with her, but only when I have permission from the chief of police. It's really not that complicated."

"Dude, that sounds, like...*unimaginably* complicated," Lucas replied.

"What base have you gotten to?" Dustin cut in.

"I dunno, like, eighth?"

"Whooooaaa!" Dustin and Lucas exclaimed, sounding impressed.

"Is that good?" Will whispered, the only honest one of the bunch.

Max groaned. "Have none of you nerds ever even *seen* a game of baseball?"

Dustin sighed before answering her. "Mayfield, not only do you absolutely know the answer to that question, but I am personally offended that you felt the need to even ask it."

"There are only four bases in baseball, idiots," Max informed them, and Mike could practically hear her rolling her eyes all the way from Hawkins.

"Damn!" Dustin exclaimed, completely missing the point. "You work *fast*, Mike!"

"Jesus Christ, Henderson..."

"Look, all joking aside, congratulations, Mike," Lucas finally cut in, suddenly sounding much more level-headed than his friends. "Seriously. This is a big deal. Like, you going to Homecoming with a

girl. Good on you."

"Yeah, even if she is eighty years old!" Dustin shouted, only to be smacked upside the head by Max. "Ow! Fuck off, Mayfield!"

"We can tell you really like her," Max said, also sounding just as sincere as Lucas. "She sounds sweet. So, treat her right and she'll treat you right. It's how girls work."

"And don't stress out too much!" Will chipped in, not to be forgotten. "Just be yourself!"

"Yeah, Mike, be yourself," Dustin reassured him. "I mean, you might be the most sarcastic guy on earth and you never know when to shut the hell up and you're a total prick sometimes and you curse way too much and you kinda smell like gym socks all the time, but...wait, where was I going with this?"

Back in Hawkins, Mike smiled despite everything and, ignoring the sounds of Max beating the shit out of Dustin in the background ("Not the face, Mayfield, not the face!"), once again found himself missing the idiots on the other end of the line. It had been over three years now since the move, and it seemed like every time he thought he would stop missing them, a postcard or a phone call like this would come along and he would find himself missing them all over again.

"Thanks, guys," he said softly, hoping they could hear him over the phone because he sure as hell wasn't going to repeat himself. "I really appreciate it."

"Anytime, dude," came Lucas's reply. "Tell us all about it next weekend, okay?"

"Will do."

"And good luck!" Will said one last time before hanging up.

'Yeah, good luck,' Mike thought to himself as he finally hung up the phone himself. *'I'm gonna need all the luck I can fucking get.'*

Seven hours later, Mike was in his bedroom trying to get ready for the dance. 'Trying' being the operative word since, as Mike was just

now beginning to discover, he had absolutely no idea what he was going to wear.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!" Mike muttered as he dug through his closet, tossing aside sweater after sweater after sweater. "Jesus Christ, don't I have *anything* nice to wear?"

"You curse a lot," Holly observed, sitting on his bed and watching him with growing amusement. She may have only been six years old, but even she knew watching Mike trying to function like an actual human being was always more entertaining than the best sitcom on television.

"It's a sign of intelligence," Mike told her as he tossed his laundry basket on the floor and began rifling through his dirty clothes. He could have sworn he had worn *something* nice in the last...year or two?

'God, this would be so much easier if I wasn't colorblind.'

"I thought you were stupid," Holly reminded him. "Because of genetics."

"Yeah, well, I was joking," Mike responded, pushing aside the dirty laundry and venturing deeper still into the closet.

"Oh," Holly stated. "Does that mean I'm not adopted after all?"

"Let's not jump to conclusions, Holly," Mike replied, frowning as he continued to dig through layer after layer of clothing. "Holy shit, this shirt has *buttons*! Score!"

"Are you and El gonna dance at Homecoming?"

"Uh, yeah, Holly, probably. That's kinda the idea of a dance."

"Do you even know how to dance?"

'Shit, she's on to me.'

"We'll figure it out," he grumbled, eyes lighting up as he finally found a pair of black slacks that *didn't* look like they'd survived the zombie

apocalypse. "Ha! Shirt *and* pants! Now we're in business."

"Are you and El gonna kiss?" Holly asked.

'*God, I hope so,*' Mike thought to himself.

"I dunno, Holly, maybe," he said out loud.

"Are you guys dating yet?"

"Not yet," Mike said with a roll of his eyes.

"So, you *will* be eventually."

"I don't know, Holly! Yes? Maybe?"

"I hope El becomes your girlfriend," Holly stated, and Mike felt his heart flutter a little in his chest as she said so.

"Yeah?" he asked with a smile, turning around to face her as he lifted a gray sweater off the floor of the closet. "You think we'd be good together?"

"I dunno," Holly admitted honestly. "But you're nicer to me when she's around."

Mike rolled his eyes. "Gee, thanks a lot. Now get out of here so I can change."

Twenty minutes later, Mike had succeeded in putting together what he believed was a pretty schnazzy outfit, all things considered: a gray sweater over a blue collared, button-down shirt with black slacks, and a brown jacket to top it all off. Sure, he didn't exactly match (like, at all), but considering his usual daily outfits consisted almost entirely of jeans, sweaters, striped T-shirts, and varying quantities of his own blood, he figured this was at least a step in the right direction.

'*Not bad, Wheeler,*' he thought to himself with a surprising amount of confidence. '*Plus, it's been almost a month since you had a black eye or a broken nose or lost a tooth, so if someone happens to take your picture at this stupid thing, at least this time it won't look like the photograph belongs*

in an autopsy report. You might actually pull this off!

So, *of course*, he had to bash himself in the face while opening his bedroom door (an action he had only successfully performed without injury roughly *four million times before*) and give himself a bloody nose right before he left.

'Well, at least now the outfit is authentic.'

Another ten minutes and three bloodied tissues later, Mike was out the door and on his way over to El's place, and he was glad he had decided to stick with the outer jacket as he biked through the chilly October air. Halloween was fast approaching, and he found himself smiling as he passed by house after house, checking out the various decorations of skulls and bats and fiery jack-o-lanterns set out on people's porches.

'Maybe I should ask El if she wants to go trick-or-treating.' Mike wondered as he turned onto her street and began heading straight for her house, ignoring all of the other (super rude) houses on the way. *'You know, if she even knows what trick-or-treating is. I can see that conversation going super well. 'Hey, El, do you want to celebrate a holiday all about death and ghosts and shit by dressing up like weirdoes and going house-to-house begging strangers for candy?' Actually, that sounds pretty goddamn awesome, she might agree to it if I explain it like that.'*

He pulled up to the Hopper residence a moment later and, leaving his bike propped up against the chief's police cruiser, made his way to the front door and knocked.

'Just play it cool,' he told himself as he straightened his jacket and waited for the door to be opened. *'When El answers, tell her she's beautiful, because obviously she will be, cuz obviously she always is, but especially tonight cuz she'll probably be in a fancy dress or something. So tell her she's beautiful and go from there. You can **do** this, Wheeler.'*

Mike cleared his throat as he heard the latch on the other side of the door come undone and saw the doorknob slowly begin to turn, indicating it was about to open, and he focused all of his mental energy on making sure he didn't screw up this *one single thing*.

'Just tell her she's beautiful, just tell her she's beautiful, just tell her she's beautiful...'

"You look beautiful!" he blurted out the moment the door opened...

...only for his face to turn a rather stupendous shade of crimson red as he realized it was not El who had opened the door, but Chief Hopper himself, dressed in his usual outfit of a pair of jeans, a flannel shirt, and an expression that demonstrated he ran out of patience for this kind of shit back in the Cretaceous period.

"Thanks, kid," Hopper answered dryly, "but to be honest, you're not really my type."

'At least he's letting me down gently.'

"Eleanor's still getting ready," Hopper continued, standing aside to let Mike in. "She should be down in just a minute. Come on in."

'Actually, Chief Hopper, sir, if it's all the same to you, I'd rather just kill myself on your front lawn.'

"Thank you, sir," Mike said instead, trying his best to fight the blush quickly spreading across his face as he walked into the foyer of the house, Hopper closing the door behind him.

"Mike's here, kiddo!" Hopper shouted up the stairs, evidently letting El know it was almost time to leave.

"Almost ready!" Mike heard El shout back down less than a second later.

A moment of silence followed as Mike stood in the center of the foyer biting his lip and looking around nervously, doing his level best not to make eye contact with Hopper, who he knew was watching him like a predatory bird preparing to swoop in on its kill. As such, Mike dedicated the entirety of his focus towards doing his best not to incur the man's infinite wrath.

*'Whatever you do, do not – I repeat, **do not** – say anything stupid!'*

"You know," Hopper began, actually sounding somewhat impressed,

"I think this is the longest you've ever gone without – "

"My intentions with your daughter are purely wholesome and are in no way sinister!"

" – embarrassing yourself in front of me," Hopper finished, his voice trailing off at the end.

'God-fucking-damn it, Wheeler!'

"Sorry, sir," Mike said, squeezing his eyes closed and trying to regain some sense of composure. "You might find this hard to believe but, beneath my rugged and macho exterior, I'm actually feeling a little nervous."

"You don't say," the chief stated simply. "So, how long is this dance, anyway?"

"Three hours? I think?" Mike answered, obviously not entirely sure. "It starts at eight, I know that. And I think it ends at eleven. But we'll probably be back before then, considering I tend to get anxious in large crowds and this is probably the first time I've ever willingly gone to a school-sponsored event and I'll probably make a fool out of myself and end up ruining the whole damn thing like I always do. Er, sir."

'You...probably didn't need to include any of that part at the end.'

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me," Hopper admitted. Chancing a look upstairs and seeing El was still nowhere to be found, he walked a little closer over to Mike, as if ensuring he would not be overheard. "She's been looking forward to this thing all week, kid, so try to show her a good time, huh? But not *too* good of a time, if you catch my drift. No funny business."

"Sir, yes, sir!" Mike said, saluting before he even knew what he was doing. "No business whatsoever, sir, funny or otherwise! Consider me unemployed!"

Hopper simply rolled his eyes. "Don't take this the wrong way, Mike, but has anyone ever told you to learn to shut your goddamn mouth before someone else shuts it for you?"

"Actually, sir, that's what my mother says to me every night right before I go to bed, though there's usually a more explicit threat of violence thrown in there somewhere, too."

"Good to know."

Mike was just about to ramble on further when he was (thankfully) distracted by the sight of El coming down the stairs, having evidently finished preparing for the dance, one hand resting on the banister as she slowly made her way down to the foyer. As such, not only did Mike feel his next words die on their way out of his throat, he was pretty sure his heart stopped at the exact same moment, along with his lungs, stomach, liver, and at least one kidney.

He had expected her to look beautiful. He had *not* expected her to look absolutely fucking *stunning*.

Now standing at the foot of the stairs in a pair of formal black flats she was clearly still getting used to, El looked up at Mike and smiled as he took her in with eyes as wide as dinner plates. The dress she wore was simple but elegant, a light blue/green in color with little specks of red floral print here and there, and a skirt that ended about mid-shin. A scarlet red belt tied it all together, hugging her already slim waist and accentuating the specks of red on her dress. Her hair, usually a short mess of bouncing brunette curls, had been combed and lightly straightened, and was pulled back so it was fully behind her ears and out of her face, save for a single curly strand stubbornly remaining right in the center of her forehead.

'Holy shit,' Mike thought to himself as he felt his eye start to twitch. *'I am so out of my league here. She looks like a fucking fairy tale princess and I look like I just fell out of the back of a garbage truck. I am so in love with this girl that it isn't even fucking funny anymore.'*

"Pretty," he mumbled, his cheeks growing hot just looking at her.

'I really have to stop fucking doing that.'

"I mean...beautiful! Not pretty, *beautiful*!" he blurted out, suddenly remembering the *one thing* he had meant to do. "You're beautiful, El! I mean, you *look* beautiful. Not that you don't always look beautiful,

because you do, you're like naturally the most beautiful girl I've ever seen, but you look like really, really beautiful right now. Like, exceptionally beautiful! Super beautiful! If there was a definitive list of all the most beautiful girls in the whole world, you would totally be at the top of the list, like, right now."

"Jesus," Hopper groaned, turning away from Mike to face his daughter. "Mike's right, though. You look great, kiddo."

"Thanks, Dad," El said with a shy smile, her own cheeks pinkening before she turned back to look at Mike. "You too, Mike."

"Yeah, uh...sure," Mike responded, his eyes never once leaving El's face.

The two most likely would have continued standing there on opposite ends of the foyer for at least the next few minutes or so had Hopper not immediately realized what was happening and decided to intervene for the sake of his own sanity.

"Don't you two have a dance to get to?" he asked, snapping them both out of their own heads.

"Right! Dance! Yes! That!" Mike spluttered, suddenly going a mile a minute. "Um, I mean, if you're ready to go, El? Cuz if you're not ready to go, we can wait, we can wait for as long as you want, or we can go somewhere else first, whatever you want, totally cool with me, I mean the dance starts at eight, but we could totally be fashionably late, or even fashionably early if you *do* want to head out right now, but whatever you wanna do is cool with me, totally cool, you do what you gotta do, right?"

And though Hopper merely rolled his eyes yet again, El still found herself giggling at Mike's semiregular rants. "Sometimes I think you do that just to make me laugh."

'Shit, she's on to me!'

"What, me? Make you laugh? Nonsense!" Mike scoffed. "I'll have you know I am a very serious individual with very serious interests, which I happen to take very seriously."

"Like watching *Star Wars*?" El asked, still smiling.

"Those films represent the absolute pinnacle of cinematic craftsmanship, and I'll not hear a word to the contrary," Mike responded defensively, which only made El laugh again.

"Okay, as much as I love watching you two awkwardly flirt right in front of me, it really is time to go," Hopper interjected, cutting in before he started dry-heaving. "If either of you need anything, I'll be down at the station filling out some paperwork before Flo bites my head off. I should be back a little before eleven, and I'll be expecting you *by eleven*, so don't think you can stay out too late, you hear me?"

"Yes, Dad," El said with a smile and a roll of her eyes, which Mike could automatically tell she had learned from none other than Hopper himself. With that out of the way, she grabbed Mike by the hand and immediately began pulling him out the front door. "Come on, Mike! Let's go!"

Mike wasn't going to argue.

It took the two of them a couple of moments to figure out how El would sit on the bike in her dress but, in the end, they took their usual positions with El sitting on the seat behind Mike and practically pressed up against him, her arms wrapped around his waist in order to keep herself from falling off. It was a system the pair had mostly perfected over the course of their friendship, with Mike volunteering to bike El home after school almost every day.

"You sure you're comfortable?" Mike asked as he prepared to start pedaling, doing his best to make sure her dress was clear of the chain and pedals. "I'm sure your dad would drop us off if we asked nicely, and maybe bribe him a little."

But El just shook her head and tightened her grip on his waist, smiling affectionately at him all the while. "No. I like riding with you."

Mike tried to ignore the way his heart stopped for three whole seconds after she said that.

"You kids have fun!" Hopper called out as Mike finally began to pedal, watching the teenagers bike off into the distance with a coy smile on his face. "But not *too* much fun!"

And then they were off, with Mike temporarily pedaling twice as hard to compensate for the fact that there were two of them on the bike and he had to maintain balance to keep El from potentially falling off. Their route was a familiar one, as Mike took it to school pretty much every morning, sometimes twice as fast to make up for the fact that he was chronically tardy.

"You okay back there?" Mike asked as they ascended the top of the hill that marked their halfway point, already sweating profusely. "Not too cold?"

"I'm okay," El told him, shouting lightly so Mike could better hear her. "Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Faster."

Mike frowned and looked back to make sure he heard her correctly. "Faster?"

"Faster," El confirmed with a mischievous smile that made Mike's heart flutter in his chest.

'Faster it is, then.'

Pumping his legs twice as fast and slowly easing off the brakes a little at a time, Mike acquiesced to the best of his ability, taking full advantage of the fact they had just passed the crest of the highest hill on their way to Hawkins High School. Mike felt his lips curl up into a smile as he allowed gravity to take control from there on out, and his cheeks began to sting from the wind chill as they continued to pick up speed. He felt El's arms tighten around him, almost squeezing the breath out of him, and he didn't even have to turn around to know her eyes were squeezed closed and she was smiling widely, her own cheeks a bright red in color as she fought to keep herself from shouting in glee. Mike wasn't even pedaling anymore, instead relying

on the steep incline of the road to accelerate.

"Fast enough?" he asked, practically yelling so that El could hear him.

"Fast enough!" El agreed, giggling into his back.

Sometimes, Mike thought to himself as he swerved ever so slightly to avoid a branch in the middle of the road, life was okay. Sure, he wasn't the most popular guy at school, and his parents fought all the time, and he was probably well on his way to developing a stomach ulcer or three, but it wasn't *all* bad. Sometimes, he managed to avoid all that. And sometimes, he even got to bike the prettiest girl in Hawkins to Homecoming as she smiled into his back.

'Sometimes life doesn't completely suck,' he realized with a smile. *'But only sometimes.'*

Five minutes later, the incline came to a gradual halt, and Mike was almost sad when he found himself pulling into the parking lot of Hawkins High School. But then he saw the colored lights in the gym and heard the rhythmic pounding of music, and he remembered why he was here and who he was with, and all was right with the world once more. Another two minutes later, the bike was left on the rack in front of the school and Mike and El were both entering the gymnasium, having given their tickets to the poor Student Council members posted outside.

Most of the bleachers in the gym had been removed or at least pushed up against the far wall in order to better make room for the Homecoming Dance, and the place was decorated from top to bottom in blue balloons, orange streamers, and fancy tablecloths. Tables and chairs were set up along the perimeter of the room and dozens of students were already milling about and beginning to dance.

"Holy shit, it looks like the Student Council threw up in here," Mike commented as he looked around the decorated gymnasium upon first entering it with El on his arm.

"I like it," El said with a small smile, admiring the same decorations. "It's nice."

"Sure, it's *nice*," Mike continued, "but you have to admit, some of the charm is lost without Troy crumpled up and whimpering in the middle of the dance floor."

"You're mean," El said, but didn't stop smiling.

"Maybe a little," Mike admitted, flashing her what he *hoped* was an award-winning smile. "Is it bad that I used to fantasize about beating Troy up all by myself?"

"Mike, I like you," El said carefully, "but I don't think you've ever beaten up anyone."

"Excuse me!" Mike scoffed, pretending to be offended. "I'll have you know that I *routinely* beat the shit out of *myself*. Troy only *wishes* he could kick my ass half as hard as I kick my own."

El giggled. "Beating yourself up doesn't count, Mike."

"Tell that to the pulpy mess that used to be my self-esteem!"

"Stop making me laugh," El told him, taking him by the hand and intertwining their fingers. "Come on. I want to look around."

"Your wish is my command," Mike said with a faint smile, letting himself be dragged along.

'You cheesy sack of shit, Wheeler.'

While Mike didn't particularly care to look around all that much (he saw most of these assholes on a daily basis, and it usually consisted of them laughing at him or spitting on him), El very obviously did. As such, he watched with mild confusion as El peered around at all of the balloons and streamers, and gasped when she saw her classmates dressed up in fancy attire, and it finally struck him (once again) that this was probably the first time El had ever been to anything even remotely resembling a formal event.

'She spent the first fourteen years of her life living like a prisoner in her own house,' Mike reminded himself as he watched her 'ooh' and 'aah' as their peers passed by in dresses and suits and other classy outfits. *'The only time she's ever seen dances or parties or anything like this are on*

*those confusing soap operas she watches all the time. She's spent her entire life watching **other** people go to dances without ever being able to do it herself. No wonder she's been so excited.'*

With that in mind, Mike felt some of his own tensions and anxieties about the dance lessen, and he at least *tried* to enjoy himself, for El's sake if not for his own.

'Just go with the flow, Wheeler,' he told himself. 'And try not to get your ass kicked by any random partygoers.'

The two thus spent the first half hour or so mingling (or at least as much as two people can mingle without actually carrying on a conversation with anyone other than each other) before eventually making their way to the refreshments, where El went about studying each and every item of food available while Mike entertained himself by watching his History teacher attempt to serve students fruit punch.

"Don't be greedy, children!" Mr. Molotov shouted at a pair of students who had evidently come back for seconds. "There is only so much punch to go around and we must ensure it is distributed equally amongst the entire student body! To each according to his needs!"

After a brief snack, the two were back to exploring, with Mike pretty much letting El drag him wherever she wanted to go. At one point they even stopped to have their picture taken, though it admittedly took several tries before they got one they liked, considering Mike's nose decided to start bleeding again the moment the first photograph was taken, and even then, Mike was pretty sure he had blood on his face in the final picture.

"I like it," El had assured him as she looked at the photograph fondly. "It wouldn't look like a real picture of you if you *weren't* bleeding."

'Fair enough.'

El was just putting the photograph away when a handsome senior Mike vaguely recognized as one of the players on the football team casually approached them, a girl on his arm. He smiled politely as he noticed Mike and El, as though they were long-lost friends.

"Hey, Hopper, looking good," said the senior with a playful wink before turning to Mike. "She still keeping you out of trouble, Wheeler?"

"Wait, do I know you?" Mike asked, genuinely confused.

"Uh, yeah?" the football player answered with a frown on his face. "Brett Matthews? Star quarterback?"

"Not ringing a bell."

"I spent most of last week trying to kick your ass," Brett reminded him.

Mike blinked. "You're gonna have to be more specific."

"Freshman Beatdown Week?"

"Way more specific."

"I was there when your girlfriend here neutered Troy Peyton."

"Keep narrowing it down."

"Jesus Christ, Wheeler."

The pair moved on and then Mike and El were alone again, still smiling and holding hands, and that's when the DJ started playing a slow song. Mike watched as all the couples began heading out onto the dance floor, hands resting on waists and shoulders, and then noticed El was watching them just as earnestly, if not more so. She gazed into the crowd of students with an expression not unlike awe, as if the ritual of dancing was something she never believed she would truly witness, much less participate in, and suddenly Mike knew he had to make it a reality for her.

'Deep breaths, Wheeler. Girls aren't attracted to guys who forget to breathe and end up passing out in the middle of the gym. They just aren't.'

So, clearing his throat and taking a deep breath, Mike turned to El and tried to put on a brave face that instead made it look more like he was fighting off a sudden and severe bout of explosive diarrhea.

"Do you want to dance?" he asked, squeezing her hand in his reassuringly.

For a moment, El looked afraid. "I...don't know how."

"I don't either," Mike admitted after a brief pause. "Want to figure it out?"

El nodded, and that was all the answer Mike required to lead her onto the dance floor. They only went a few feet in, clearly not being either the most experienced dancers or the most popular students, but it was close enough that they could hear the music while still maintaining at least the illusion of privacy.

"Okay," Mike mumbled as he turned to face El and tried to figure exactly what he was doing. "I think you put your hands on my shoulders, like this..."

El smiled as Mike 'helped' move her hands onto his shoulders, and she took the liberty of gently moving them back farther still, so she practically had her arms wrapped around his neck.

"Yeah, like that," he said, blushing lightly. "And then I...do this."

And Mike reached up and placed his hands on her shoulders as well.

'Congratulations, Michael Wheeler, you have successfully achieved a level of social awkwardness never before witnessed by the faculty or students of Hawkins High School. Please come on up to the stage to accept your ass-kicking.'

"Waist, Mike," El corrected him with a smile on her face.

"Waste what?" Mike asked, suddenly defensive for reasons he didn't fully understand. "I'm not wasting anything. Who said I was wasting anything? Maybe *you're* wasting something, you ever think about that?!"

"No, put your hands on my waist," El reiterated with another giggle, temporarily removing her hands from around his neck so she could take his and move them down to either side of her waist, just above the curve of her hips.

"Oh!" Mike exclaimed, gulping as he felt the fabric of El's dress beneath his fingers. "Right, right...sorry. Gotta be careful with those homophones."

With Mike's hands successfully (if loosely) holding her by the waist, El blushed lightly and moved her own hands back up to his shoulders, slowly snaking them around his neck once again and pulling herself in closer.

And they danced.

Or, at least, they *tried* to dance. It became evident fairly quickly that neither of them really knew what to do other than sway back and forth slightly, and Mike still had absolutely no goddamn idea what to do with his feet, which resulted in him stumbling and almost falling over a grand total of three times in less a minute, but El always managed to catch him with a laugh and help him right himself again.

'Well, at least I've managed not to step on her foot yet,' he thought to himself as he immediately proceeded to step on her foot.

"Ow!"

'Goddamn it, Wheeler!'

"Shit, I'm so sorry!" Mike apologized altogether too fast, drawing away so he couldn't possibly hurt her again. "Oh my god, I can't believe I just did that. That's like the worst, most cliched thing you can ever do while you're dancing with someone, and I just fucking did it because I'm such a fucking wastoid. Literally the first and only time I have ever danced with a pretty girl and I just smooshed your foot like it was goddamn guacamole. El, I am so sorry, I swear to god it will never happen again, I just need to stop by the bathroom and perform a real quick amputation and then everything will be alright, well all-left, I guess, since it's the right foot I plan on removing, but that's not the – "

"Mike," El interrupted him for the four millionth time since she met him. "It's okay. It didn't hurt."

"Friends don't lie, El," Mike reminded her.

There was a pause. "It hurt a little."

'I'm chopping the damn thing off.'

"But it's okay," El reassured him, wrapping her arms around his neck again and pulling him back towards her. "We're learning. You and me. Together."

With that, they resumed swaying back and forth awkwardly, and Mike slowly found himself *finally* beginning to tap into some kind of rhythm, or at least enough that he wasn't tripping over his own feet or accidentally stepping on El's. Regardless, he knew he was still stiff as all hell and he was probably sweating through every layer of clothing he was wearing.

If El noticed, however, she didn't seem to mind, even going so far as to close her eyes as she let Mike take the lead in moving them back and forth. Whereas Mike felt (and looked) like a poorly animated mannequin with a literal stick up its ass, El only seemed to be growing more and more comfortable the longer they danced, and Mike was thankful for that at least.

'Keep it together, Wheeler,' he reminded himself, trying to ignore the sweat in his eyes. *'This is what you wanted, right? To dance with the prettiest girl in the whole fucking world. At least **try** to enjoy yourself.'*

"Thank you for doing this," El said suddenly, shocking Mike out of his own head. She was practically resting her head against his chest, her eyes closed as she looked away from him.

"Seriously? Thank you for saying yes when I asked you to come," Mike said with a small smile, trying to guide her without pushing his luck and 'accidentally' letting his arms wrap around her waist. "If someone told me two months ago that I would be going to Homecoming with the most beautiful girl in the world, I would have laughed in their face...and then probably gotten punched in *my* face in return, since the only people who ever talked to me before you generally did so because they were about to kick my ass anyway. Ah, the good ol' days."

El laughed into his chest, still not bothering to look up at him. They

continued 'dancing' for a while longer, and when next El spoke, her voice was noticeably softer.

"I'm not the most beautiful girl in the world," she whispered, still talking into his chest.

'*You are to me,*' Mike thought.

"You are to me," he also said out loud.

'*Shit, did I say that out loud **again?***'

"Shit, did I say that out loud *again?*"

'*Stop fucking doing that!*'

Mike was about to keep on talking (because *of course* he was) when he suddenly felt El begin to stiffen in his arms, and his concern for her washed away his own humiliation almost instantly.

"El?" he asked softly, frowning as he tried to look down at her. "Are you okay?"

But El didn't answer, instead burying her face further into his chest and tightening her grip on him, practically pressing herself up against him. She continued to move unfettered, as though focusing entirely on the dance.

"El!" Mike said, shaking her lightly, trying to get her attention. "Hey, look at me."

El shook her head.

"El, come on, just let me see you."

Another shake, this one more violent.

"El...please," Mike said again, this time practically whispering.

And maybe it was because he said it with such concern and sincerity in his voice, or maybe just because he said 'please,' but El finally pulled her head away from Mike's chest in order to look up at him,

revealing her face was flushed and her eyes were filled with tears.

'Fuck, I broke her.'

"El, what's wrong?" he asked, pulling back slightly so he could better examine her face and look into her teary eyes. "What happened?"

El swallowed, and Mike assumed she was fighting back a sob. "Scared."

"Scared?" Mike asked, frowning in confusion for a moment before it finally hit him, and he felt his eyes widen in realization. "Are you... are you having an episode? Right now?"

She sniffled, and then nodded, as if embarrassed to admit it.

'I should have expected this,' Mike thought to himself as he pulled El close and immediately began working on what to do. *'I'm, like, one surprise birthday party away from a panic attack at any given moment, and I have a fucking nervous breakdown anytime a teacher so much as asks me to answer a question in class. And here we are in the middle of a fucking school dance, surrounded by hundreds of people neither of us particularly like, pretending we know what the hell we're doing. No wonder El feels overwhelmed; she must be fucking terrified!'*

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked as he looks down at El, his eyes swimming with concern.

"Didn't want to," El said with a soft sniffle. "First dance. Don't want to ruin it."

'Ruin it? You're already here with me, how much worse could it possibly get?'

"You aren't ruining anything, El," Mike told her gently but firmly. Holding her close, he took a cursory glance around the gym and identified the nearest exit. "Do you want to go outside? Just for a little bit?"

El nodded. "Yes, please."

"Come on," Mike said with a smile, showing her he wasn't mad the

only way he knew how.

Hand in hand, the two gradually made their way past several dancing couples, doing their best not to get in anyone's way or draw any unwanted attention to themselves. They bumped into a few people here and there, and more than one dancer was left with a bit of a bruised foot, but for the most part it looked like they were going to make a clean break. Unfortunately, at least one couple seemed to notice them on their way off the dance floor and felt the need to announce it.

"Nice going, Wheeler, you made your date cry!"

"You make your parents cry every time you look at them, Delfino!" Mike shouted back without stopping.

And then he and El were outside, and the chilly October air was stinging their faces as the door closed behind them. The lights and sounds of the dance were instantly muffled, fading into the background to be replaced by the starry night sky above and the sound of the wind blowing through the nearby football field.

Still holding her by the hand, Mike led El around the gym and towards the front of the building, finally seating both of them in a familiar metal bench so they could look out over the parking lot, filled as it was with the cars of those students attending the dance. Mike shivered slightly as he sat down on the bench, feeling the cold metal beneath him, but El didn't seem to notice at all, hugging herself as she was in an attempt to keep herself from breaking down entirely.

"Hey, come here," Mike said softly, hesitantly wrapping an arm around El's shoulders in an effort to pull her closer. "It's okay. It's just me. It's Mike."

El was stiff for only a moment longer before she gave in and cuddled up to Mike, wrapping her arms around him in a fierce hug as she once again buried her head in his chest. Mike responded by wrapping his own arms around El protectively, almost possessively, holding her close as she shook gently. He could feel her tears staining the gray sweater he was wearing beneath his jacket but, frankly, Mike didn't much care; he simply pulled her closer and rested his head on hers

and rocked her back and forth slightly, hoping the motion might help calm her down.

They remained that way for a few minutes, with El crying into Mike's sweater and squeezing him ever tighter as he held her close and gently robbed her back. The night was cold, and the metal bench colder, but holding El in his arms always made Mike warm in a way he could neither describe nor fully understand, and so he barely noticed the autumn chill.

After a while, El began to sniffle lightly and Mike could hear her crying slow and her breathing calm, and he knew the episode was approaching its end. That meant there was only one thing left for him to do.

'No, no, no, you are **not** fucking doing this again...' he tried (unsuccessfully) to tell himself.

"Life, it seems, will fade away," Mike began to sing, somehow successfully missing every single note. "Drifting further every day."

'Again with the Metallica? You can't even remember your own middle name, but somehow you've memorized the lyrics to every fucking Metallica song? Goddamn it.'

"Getting lost within myself," he continued, "nothing matters, no one else."

*'What song is this, anyway? Fade to Black? Are you singing **Fade to Black** right now?!'*

"I have lost the will to live. Simply nothing more to give."

*'Yeah, sure, go ahead, sing a song about fucking **suicide**, that'll cheer her right the fuck up.'*

"There is nothing more for me. Need the end to set me free."

'This is why everybody's first instinct is to beat the shit out of you, Wheeler.'

Mike's singing was brought to an early (and thankful) end when he

heard El begin to giggle into his chest, even as she was recovering from her episode. Though there were clearly still tears in her eyes and she kept sniffing, trying to clear her nose, her breathing was more regular now, and Mike could already tell she was beginning to feel better.

'Mike Wheeler, you are one lucky son of a bitch. Literally anyone else would have murdered your ass by now.'

"You can't sing Metallica every time I get scared," El eventually mumbled into his chest, smacking him lightly but smiling all the same.

"I'll stop doing it when it stops working," Mike fired back, giving her another squeeze of reassurance. "Feeling better?"

El nodded. "Yes. Better."

They sat there for a while, just holding each other and looking out over the parking lot, the muffled sounds of the music still playing in the gymnasium providing a light soundtrack to the evening.

"This is where we first became friends, you remember?" Mike asked at last, breaking the silence in what he hoped was a natural and conversational tone. "This is where we met."

"You were bleeding on the ground and no one else was helping you," El remembered, frowning slightly at the memory. "Mouth-breathers."

"And then there you were."

"You thought I was an angel," El reminded him with a smile.

"I'm still not convinced you *aren't*," Mike told her with a smile of his own. "I mean...you listen to me, you spend time with me, you even kiss me! Not to mention the fact you haven't tried to beat me up even once! Not even a little! Either you're an angel sent from Heaven or there's something seriously wrong with you."

El shook her head. "No. There's something wrong with everyone else. They're stupid."

She sniffled and wiped away the last of her tears, and Mike only felt his smile grow as she settled back into him comfortably, this time not out of necessity or a need for protection, but simply because she wanted to be near him.

"I'm sorry," she said softly, her voice still small.

"You don't have anything to apologize for," Mike stated seriously and confidently. "You can't control it. It's not your fault."

"I just...wanted tonight to be perfect," El told him sadly. "I've never danced before. Or been someone's date. I see it on TV, and it looks... fun. I wanted that. I wanted that with *you*. But...it was too much. I got scared again."

"El, it's okay," Mike reassured her honestly. "It's, like, *normal* to get scared at social events and dances and stuff. Those things are stressful as hell! All that social interaction? Ugh, I don't even like to *think* about it! Plus, at least your fear makes sense. Me, I'm scared of everything. Everything! You name it, I'm afraid of it!"

"Are you afraid of homework?" El asked, the beginnings of a smile on her face.

"Terrified," Mike answered dutifully.

"Football?"

"Horrificed."

"Squirrels?"

"*Petrified*."

"My dad?"

"Don't even get me started on your dad!" Mike practically blurted out, shivering involuntarily. "When I look into his eyes, I swear to god I see the tortured souls of a million innocent Iguanodons writhing in the fiery pits of the Hell he sent them to!"

That finally made El laugh, and Mike felt his heart skip a beat or

twelve at the sound of her laughter, not only because it meant she was beginning to feel better, but also because it meant *he* was making her feel better.

'I really should see a doctor about that,' he reminded himself. *'You know, just in case.'*

"Thank you," El said softly, "for understanding. And for helping me. Again."

"Don't worry about it," Mike replied, shrugging lightly, as if to prove his point. "We're friends, El. And that's what friends are for."

El nodded, smiling lightly. "Yes. Best friends."

They fell into a comfortable silence after that, with Mike holding El in his arms and her cuddled up to him, burying her head between his neck and shoulder. Despite the fact they had been friends for almost two months at this point, Mike still found it astounding at how easily he and El seemed to fit together, how comfortable silence could be between them even in a school parking lot. Even when he was living in Montauk with the rest of the Party, before he had come to Hawkins and made the terrifying transformation into Michael 'Loudmouth' Wheeler, Mike had always felt like silence was awkward and unnecessary, and yearned for background noise and arguments and constant interaction with his friends.

But here, now? It was different. As much as Mike loved talking to El – and, holy shit, if there was one thing he liked to do, it was *talk* – he loved the quiet moments with her just as much. Whether they were reading their textbooks and completing schoolwork together in the basement, or sitting beneath their favorite tree during lunch, or even comforting one another on a cold bench by the school parking lot while the rest of their peers engaged in teenage debauchery, Mike felt *comfortable* with the quiet so long as El was there beside him. He no longer felt the need to fill the silence with sarcastic remarks or loud debate or constant chatter; so long as El was there, it seemed, not a word needed to be said.

'To think, Troy and everyone else spent so many years tormenting me and beating the shit out of me just trying to (unsuccessfully) get me to shut the

'fuck up...and El can do it without even trying,' Mike thought with a smile. 'It's almost like I respond better to kisses than ass-kicking. Weird how that works.'

Mike was pulled out of his thoughts when he both heard and felt El yawn into his chest, her eyes fluttering closed as she did so. He couldn't blame her for being tired; she'd had a rough night, all things considered, and he knew her episodes took a lot out of her.

"You tired?" he asked her, rubbing her back again. "I can take you home if you want."

"You won't be mad?" El asked gently, as if she had been expecting otherwise.

"Nah," Mike answered honestly. "It's already been, what, an hour? Which is a whole hour more than I was expecting you to stay considering who you're here with. Besides, the longer we stay, the greater the chances are of me causing a scene or accidentally setting the gym on fire...again."

El raised an eyebrow. "Again?"

"It's a long story."

'How the hell was I supposed to know pudding cups are flammable?!'

But El just smiled and nodded, and Mike took that as permission to help her stand and walk over to where his bike was chained up. A couple of minutes later, the two were off, leaving behind the flashing lights and pounding music of Homecoming in favor of the darkling streets of suburban Hawkins.

The ride back to El's house was quieter and less exciting than the ride to the high school had been, but Mike had no complaints. He merely focused on the task at hand as he felt El tighten her arms around him and press herself against his back, as though holding on for dear life. It was a slower, gentler journey, but for Mike, El's presence alone made it worth it.

Mike pulled up into the driveway of the Hopper residence just a little past 9:30 to find the chief's Blazer missing, indicating he was still at

the police station. Slowing to a stop in front of the garage, he brought his feet to the ground and held the bike steady as El dismounted behind him, careful not to stain or tear her dress.

"Come in with me?" she asked, standing next to him. "I...don't want to be alone."

Mike hesitated. "Promise your dad won't murder me and mount my corpse as an example to any potential future boyfriends?"

"Promise," El said with a smile, taking his hand and leading the way into the house.

The lights were already on in the foyer when they got inside, Hopper having evidently left them on in hopes of deterring any potential intruders, or else simply because he had forgotten to shut them off in the first place. It wasn't the first time Mike had been alone with El in the house; he had spent the night just a few weeks ago, after all, and Hopper let him stay over after school on days he didn't particularly want to head straight home, provided he called Hopper at the station to let him know first. Mike simply assumed he would stay with El until such time as she felt safe enough to be on her own, or Hopper came home, whichever came first.

"Thank you for bringing me back," El said again, looking down as though embarrassed. "I'm sorry we had to leave. I wanted to stay. I wanted to keep dancing with you, but...I couldn't. And I'm sorry."

"It's okay, El," Mike reassured her yet again. "Really. As long as I get to be with you, I don't care where I am."

'Lame.'

But El smiled, so Mike must have said something right. "I'm going to wash up. Will you still be here when I get back?"

"Nothing could keep me away," Mike said with a smile.

'Super lame.'

He watched as El made her way down the hallway and then disappeared into the bathroom. After leaning against the front door

for a few seconds, Mike decided to venture farther into the house and eventually made his way into the living room, the most spacious part of the first floor, relatively small though it was. Standing in the center of the darkened room, Mike's thoughts quickly turned back to El.

'I wish I could have done more for her,' he thought, still listening to the running water in the nearby bathroom as she washed her face. 'I meant it when I said I don't blame her or anything, but I wish she could have had more time at the dance. I know how much she was looking forward to it. I wish there was something I could do, but...I guess it's too late now.'

Then he noticed the turntable sitting on the cabinet next to the rabbit-eared television.

And the box of records sitting on the shelf right beneath it.

Mike smiled. He had an idea.

*'She **did** say she wanted to keep dancing with me...right?'*

When El finally came out of the bathroom, her face successfully washed free of tears and makeup, and her hair just barely coming undone, she noticed right away the sound of music playing from somewhere in the house.

*Every breath you take
Every move you make
Every bond you break
Every step you take
I'll be watching you*

"Mike?" she asked as she began to make her way down the hallway, looking for him. He wasn't in the foyer anymore. Where had he gone?

And where was that music coming from?

It wasn't exactly a big house, so it didn't take long for El to trace the sound of the music to the living room, and her eyes widened when she entered the room to find Mike standing in the center of it, waiting for her with a shy smile on his face. A record spun on the

turntable behind him, the source of the music.

"I don't know how you feel about The Police," Mike said with a smile and a light blush, even going so far as to scratch the back of his neck awkwardly, "but your dad didn't exactly have any Metallica."

El smiled. "It's okay."

*Every single day
Every word you say
Every game you play
Every night you stay
I'll be watching you*

"I know Homecoming didn't go like you hoped," Mike admitted as he walked over to where El stood in the threshold of the living room. "And I know you said you wanted to keep dancing. So I thought, maybe...we could have one last dance. Together. I mean...if you want?"

He held his hand out to her, and waited. Though she had already done quite enough crying for one night, El nonetheless felt the unmistakable sting of tears at the edges of her eyes as she looked at the boy standing before her, her heart nearby bursting with all the love she felt for him at that very moment. He was her friend, her *first* friend, her *best* friend, and this was exactly why he was all of those things.

El finally nodded, still smiling, tears gleaming along the edges of her eyes as she reached out and silently accepted Mike's hand.

*Oh, can't you see
You belong to me?
How my poor heart aches with every step you take*

They swayed together in the center of the living room, calmly, peacefully, no longer worrying about who was watching or where they were stepping or whether they were doing it exactly right, simply letting the music guide their gentle movements.

Mike smiled as he felt El's arms snake their way up his shoulders and

around his neck, pulling him in closer, and he instinctively reacted by wrapping his own arms around her waist, pulling *her* closer to *him*. There were tears in El's eyes, but Mike knew they weren't from sorrow or fear or regret, knew from the way she smiled up at him like he was everything she had ever wanted out of life.

He had already enjoyed their first dance together immensely, the three stumbles and the whole 'stepping on her foot' thing notwithstanding. But this...he liked *this* dance even more.

'Maybe I won't cut off my right foot after all.'

*Every move you make
Every vow you break
Every smile you fake
Every claim you stake
I'll be watching you*

The music seemed to gradually fade away into the background as Mike looked down at the girl in his arms, the girl who meant everything to him, who *was* everything to him, and suddenly he felt a little bit like he had felt a week ago when he and El were hiding from the football team in the supply closet by the gym.

All he saw was her. Her simple dress fluttering slightly with her movements, hugging her waist and flowing about like it was made for her. Her beautiful hair, all combed and fancy, with that one stray curl dangling in front of her forehead. Her autumn brown eyes that burned into his soul like fire and honey, wet as they were with happy tears. The smile on her lips, the lips he realized right then and there that he absolutely *needed* in order to survive...

'Don't want to surprise her like last time,' he reminded himself at the last second. *'Let her know you're about to kiss her, Wheeler, just in case she doesn't want to. Just be sure to do it without ruining the mood. Be smooth. Be romantic.'*

"I'm coming in," he whispered.

'You're fucking hopeless.'

*Since you've gone I've been lost without a trace
I dream at night, I can only see your face
I look around but it's you I can't replace
I feel so cold, and I long for your embrace
I keep crying baby, baby, please...*

But then he was kissing her, and it didn't matter, it didn't matter how goddamn embarrassing or hopeless he was, because he was kissing *her*, and she was kissing *him*, and they were kissing *each other*, and he couldn't imagine ever being as happy as he was at that moment.

It wasn't like in the supply closet, when neither of them could get enough of the other, and they virtually battled for dominance. This kiss was calmer, sweeter, somehow more innocent, but somehow also more *meaningful*, at least as far as Mike was concerned. This kiss was closer to the second kiss they had shared, the one El had bestowed upon him on the second day of school after he had told off Troy and they were alone in the halls with no one to judge or interrupt them. Even then, this kiss was different. This wasn't a 'you saved my life' kiss, or a 'thank you for being my friend' kiss, or even one of El's many 'just to shut you the hell up' kisses she very often bestowed upon Mike. This was about something else, something *more*.

This kiss was a promise.

*Oh, can't you see
You belong to me?
How my poor heart aches with every step you take*

They pulled apart a moment later, their lips separating and a shaky breath of air escaping from each of their mouths, but it wasn't awkward or uncomfortable or confusing this time. As if synchronized, they opened their eyes at the same time to witness the goofy smile gracing the face of the other, and then they were leaning in gently and their foreheads were pressed together, and all was right with the world.

"Thank you," El breathed, looking up and into the eyes of the boy who had set all of this up for her. "For this. For everything."

"Anytime," Mike whispered back, gazing into her own fiery brown

eyes and wondering how in the world he ever survived a single moment in this godforsaken town without her. "Seriously, anytime, anytime at all, I don't exatly have a social life outside of you or anything, so it's not like you'll be interrupting anything important, or even anything *remotely* important. Not that *you* aren't important, obviously! Like, even if I actually *was* doing something important, I would still totally abandon it for you, that's just how important you are to me. So, when I say anytime, I really mean *anytime*, and, uh... yeah, I'm gonna shut up now."

'You got it **bad**, dude. **Way** bad.'

*Every move you make
Every vow you break
Every smile you fake
Every claim you stake
I'll be watching you*

The music went on, and the two of them swayed to it gently, lazily, smiling as they looked at each other, like everything else in the room had simply vanished, leaving behind only the two of them. Nothing else existed; nothing else mattered. Just them. Only them. No one and nothing else.

"So, I know Homecoming didn't work out, and I stepped on your foot, and you had an episode, and my nose won't seem to stop bleeding for some reason, but...I'm still really glad we went," Mike said at last, feeling his cheeks burn brighter with every word he said.

"Me too," El replied, smiling at his red cheeks. "You made everything better. Like you always do."

Mike smiled. "We're not exactly normal, are we?"

"No," El answered, shaking her head in response. "But fuck normal."

"Yeah," Mike said with a smile. "Fuck normal."

*Every move you make
Every step you take
I'll be watching you*

I'll be watching you

The song ended soon after, and then the only sound either of them heard was their own faint breathing, their arms still wrapped around one another as they were. El closed her eyes and rested her head against Mike's chest, and Mike rested his head on top of hers shoulder thereafter, allowing El to savor (even if only temporarily) the feeling of being held completely by him, his chin on her scalp, his body pressed against hers, his arms wrapped tightly around her waist.

'*Would you look at that,*' Mike thought to himself as he smiled upon feeling El cuddle into his chest, '*I might have actually done something right for once.*'

"Mike?" El asked, her voice soft and gentle and only audible at all because of the silence that otherwise dominated the household.

"Yeah?" Mike responded.

"Kiss me again. Please."

'*Well, since you asked so nicely, I suppose I **could**...*'

Mike lifted his head just as El pulled away from his chest and looked up at him with such an expression of *love* and *happiness* in her eyes that, even if he *hadn't* already been planning on kissing her, Mike simply couldn't resist.

Gently, hesitantly, he lifted one of his hands and placed it on El's cheek, practically cupping her face in the palm of his hand, and he felt his breath freeze in his lungs when she closed her eyes and gasped at his touch, and he couldn't help but take a moment to gaze at her, taking in just how beautiful she was, how *gorgeous* she was, how absolutely fucking *stunning* –

'*Oh, for the love of – just kiss her already, dumbass!*'

Unfortunately, it was *just* as Mike was leaning in to kiss El that Hopper decided to come home.

Both teens froze as the chief opened the front door and strutted into the house, unwittingly providing himself with a front-row seat as

Michael 'Loudmouth' Wheeler moved in to lay one on the lips of his only begotten daughter, his innocent little girl, the flower of his life. The merry tune he had been whistling as he entered the foyer dwindled and sputtered until it died in his throat, and Mike could actually *see* the muscles bulge beneath the man's reddening face as his formerly content expression slowly morphed into one of pure, animalistic rage.

'Now I know how the dinosaurs felt right before he powerslammed them into oblivion.'

Though it could only have been for a few awkward seconds, Mike felt as though hours passed as he stood there, frozen in time, lips puckered and literally *centimeters* away from El's own, but eyes wide with pure, unadulterated fear as he stared at Hopper, trying to decide what to do. Did he pretend Hopper wasn't there and just kiss El anyway? Did he pull away and beg forgiveness in hopes of living to see his next birthday? It wasn't exactly like he could pretend he *wasn't* about to kiss El.

'Ah, fuck it,' he thought to himself as he finally threw caution to the wind and pressed his lips against El's. *'At least I get to die happy.'*

"Wheeler!"

'Worth it.'

A/N: R.I.P. Mike Wheeler. He died as he lived: making poor decisions.

Tune in next time for our penultimate chapter!

As always, I encourage you to leave kudos, comments, and reviews! Thanks again!

7. Mike Toes The Damn Line

A/N: And here we are, folks: the penultimate chapter! Yet another great big thanks to everyone who has stuck with me and this story for as long as you have; I can only hope these last two chapters live up to the hype.

Here we go!

Friday, November 8th, 1985.

BRIIIIIING!

The final bell of the day rang and suddenly the halls of Hawkins High School were filled to bursting with hundreds of students anxious to be literally anywhere else in the world than where they were right then and there. It had been two whole weeks since Homecoming and, with Thanksgiving another two whole weeks away at least, most of the students of Hawkins High were understandably restless and more than a little ready for a break in routine.

Among these students were Mike Wheeler and El Hopper, both of whom exited their shared English class clutching new copies of *Macbeth* as they made their way through the crowded hallways and towards their respective lockers. Having heard of the poet but never having read any of his plays, El was listening intently as Mike provided a riveting (and only mildly embellished) synopsis of one of Shakespeare's more popular works.

"...and, she's, like, super upset because her dad wants her to marry Count Capital-of-France – remember, the dude from the beginning of the play who showed up once and then, like, fucking disappears? – and when she tries to get the marriage delayed, her mother goes ape-shit for some reason, and it's all just one big fucking mess," Mike continued, somehow able to keep going without stopping to take even a single breath. "So, Juliet goes to the friar, and he gives her some creepy potion that will put her to sleep and make everyone think she's dead, because *apparently* that's just how people solved their problems back then, and he sends off some messenger or someone to tell Romeo about the plan, but this is Shakespeare, so of

course the messenger gets lost or drunk or something and doesn't show up. Anyway, Juliet takes the potion and everyone thinks she's dead and they bury her in the family crypt because why take a pulse, am I right?"

"Mouth-breathers," El commented, sticking close to Mike so as not to be pushed aside by any of the surrounding students hustling and bustling to and fro.

"Seriously. So, anyway, Romeo hears about Juliet kicking the bucket and buys some poison because that's just how Romeo rolls, and he goes to see Juliet and ends up killing Count Frenchy along the way because it's the 16th century and, shit, Shakespeare needs a body count if he wants good ratings. Then, instead of waiting for, like, literally *two goddamn minutes*, Romeo chugs the poison like it's Super Bowl Sunday and it's the last fucking can of Pabst Blue Ribbon in all of Italy. So then, like, the fucking *moment* Romeo croaks, Juliet wakes up, sees he's dead as Lenin, and then stabs herself to death with a 'happy dagger,' which I'm pretty sure is an innuendo or something, but I don't know for sure because none of my old English teachers will talk to me anymore. And then both their families show up to the tomb at the same damn time because, hell, it's been like eight hours and we're all ready to go home by now, and they get all sad and decide to shake hands and stop killing each other over silverware, or thumb-biting, or whatever the hell it is they were fighting about in the first place. And...yeah. The end."

El frowned. "That's how *Romeo and Juliet* ends? With everyone dead?"

"Swear to god," Mike assured her as they finally reached her locker. "Cross my heart and...hope I don't end up in one of Shakespeare's plays, I guess, cuz then I'll definitely end up dead, and I'd really hate to rob your father of the opportunity."

Mike had only narrowly avoided being wiped from the face of the earth the night of October 26th, after being straight-up caught kissing El in Hopper's living room the very moment the chief came home. To be fair, Mike wasn't exactly sure whether Hopper had tried to kill him simply because Mike had kissed El or because of the fact that he had done so knowing *full fucking well* that Hopper was present and could see every last detail.

'Not that it stopped El from kissing me back,' Mike reminded himself. 'Face it, Hopper, she likes me, and that means you gotta put up with me, just like **everybody** else!'

Hopper's wrath notwithstanding, Mike had managed to survive the evening by ducking beneath several pieces of furniture and escaping through an open window, making it back to his own home with little more than a few scrapes and bruises, and a nose that simply wouldn't stop bleeding. By the time he walked through the front door, both of his parents were already asleep, leaving only Holly awake to greet Mike.

"Holly? Shouldn't you be in bed by now?" Mike had asked upon finding his six-year-old sister sitting in the kitchen and working diligently on her latest crayon masterpiece.

"Shouldn't you still be at the dance?" Holly had countered, coloring furiously.

"Touché."

"Did you and El kiss?" she asked him further, still not looking up from her drawing.

"We totally did," Mike admitted, still smiling a little goofily.

"Did the chief catch you?"

"He totally did."

"Is that why your nose is bleeding?"

"It totally is."

"Knew it," Holly had commented, finishing her drawing with a smile and then lifting it up so Mike could see it. "See? I drew a picture of the chief beating you up."

"Holy shit, Holly, I don't think the human body even *contains* that much blood."

"There would have been more, but I ran out of red crayons again."

Suffice it to say, things between Mike and El's father had been somewhat *awkward* since that evening, and Mike had done his level best to avoid being left alone in the same room with the man. Thankfully, El hadn't had any episodes since Homecoming, so there was little reason for Mike to sneak over in the middle of the night or have any one-on-ones with the chief of police.

"My dad doesn't want to kill you," El assured Mike as she opened her locker and began putting away her things and packing up the rest. "He likes you. He really does."

'Yeah, but he likes me the way my dad likes his steaks,' Mike thought to himself, *'scared as shit and burnt to a fucking crisp.'*

"He just doesn't want me kissing you," Mike said instead, leaning against the locker next to El's and watching as she pulled out an oversized jacket with which to protect herself from the cold November air.

El blushed lightly as she pulled on her jacket and closed her locker, but still deeply enough that Mike couldn't help but notice. "He doesn't want us to kiss in front of him, I think. It's different."

"Different?" Mike asked, raising an inquisitive eyebrow as they began heading for his locker, which was both farther away from their English class and closer to the school doors. "El, are you implying that we can keep kissing so long as your dad can't see us? Because that is unimaginably devious of you, young lady, and I *like* it."

"I didn't say that," El said, smiling coyly as her cheeks grew even hotter. "We're *friends*, Mike. You said it yourself. And friends don't kiss."

"So...you *don't* want to keep kissing?"

"I didn't say that, either."

'Score!'

They finally reached Mike's locker, and El continued to ask him questions about what Shakespeare as he tossed his books and binders into the locker and began shoving the rest into his backpack. He

pulled out a hoodie and put it on before closing the locker, and soon the two of them were heading out the doors of the school, ready to enjoy the weekend.

"You want to head over to my place?" Mike asked as he and El stepped outside into the brisk November air, surrounded as they were by dozens upon dozens of other Hawkins High students heading to their respective cars or buses. "It's Friday, so my dad's hibernation will kick in as soon as he's done eating dinner, and that means my mom is usually in a pretty good mood. We can probably knock out the first act of *Macbeth* like right away. And, if you're extra nice to me, I'll even translate the lines into 'Mikespearean' and read them out loud for you."

El giggled. "Mikespearean is just you reading the exact same lines, but with a lot more cursing."

"And with funny voices!" Mike reminded her, almost offended. "So, what do you say? Think your dad will be up for it?"

"I'm sorry, Mike, but I can't," El answered, shaking her head and sitting down on the familiar metal bench stationed by the parking lot. "Dad's picking me up and then we're going to visit Mama for the weekend."

This news was not particularly surprising to Mike, as he knew Hopper took El to visit her mother in Indianapolis about once a month or so, usually over the weekend. Terry Ives's health had been steadily declining since the summer, both physically and mentally, and, while El was usually mum on the details of her mother's affliction, and Mike was far too chicken-shit to ever ask Hopper, he nonetheless had a gnawing feeling in his stomach that the poor woman wasn't going to be around for much longer. So, the idea of El visiting her mother was not in itself unexpected; the timing, however, was.

"I thought you just went to see her last weekend," Mike commented, more concerned than disappointed. "Is she okay?"

El shrugged noncommittally. "The same, mostly. But my birthday is on Monday, so I wanted to see her."

Somewhere, a record scratched as Mike literally felt his brain stroke out for a second.

'Wait, **WHAT?!**' he asked himself the moment his mind began to form coherent thoughts again.

"Wait, **WHAT?!**" he also asked out loud.

El frowned, taken aback. "Mike?"

*'Did El just say her **birthday** is on **Monday**? She did, didn't she? She just told me her birthday, the day celebrating the occasion of her birth, is on Monday. **This** Monday. **This coming** Monday. Which means El's birthday is in less than three days...and I had no fucking IDEA?!'*

"S-S-Sorry," Mike stuttered, blinking furiously and still clearly not in full control of his actions. "I just, uh...what did you say just now?"

"Mama is the same?"

"No, after that."

"My birthday is on Monday?"

"Yeah, that. Could you repeat that?"

"My birthday is on Monday?" El repeated, clearly confused.

"One more time? For posterity's sake?"

"My birthday is on Monday," El said yet again, this time smiling a little bit, as though she thought Mike was joking.

He wasn't.

'*Wheeler, you are **so** fucking screwed.*'

"I, uh...I didn't know your birthday was on Monday," Mike finally admitted, his voice coming out as little more than a strained squeak despite his best efforts to sound nonchalant.

"November 11th," El confirmed with a small smile. "I'm excited. I'm turning fifteen."

A second record scratched somewhere, this one somehow even louder than the first.

*'Did she just say she's turning **fifteen**?!'* Mike thought to himself.

"Did you just say you're turning fifteen?" he also asked out loud, *again*.

'Stop fucking doing that!'

"Yes," El responded. "Why?"

*'She's **older** than me?!'*

"Oh, no reason," Mike said unconvincingly, his right eye already twitching faster than a hummingbird on cocaine.

'HOLY SHIT, DUSTIN WAS RIGHT, I'M IN LOVE WITH AN OLDER WOMAN.'

Thankfully, Mike was saved from having to say anything else by the timely arrival of Hopper's police Blazer as it pulled into the parking lot and came to a stop by the sidewalk just a few meters away. El noticed and was immediately up and about, with Mike standing up awkwardly right after, his mind still a million miles away.

"There's my dad," El said, both hands still grabbing the straps of her backpack. She turned to look back at Mike and graced him with another affectionate smile. "I'll ask him if you can come over when we get back, okay? Maybe you can read to me in Mikespearean then."

"Yeah, maybe," Mike replied uncertainly, trying to smile confidently and managing only to make himself look even more uncomfortable than he already was, were such a thing even possible. "Have fun in Indianapolis. And tell your mom I said hi, okay?"

"I will," El said with a smile and a nod. "Bye, Mike!"

"Bye, El!" he shouted back, going so far as to wave like a goober as she took off, heading for the Blazer, her backpack bouncing as she ran.

A moment later, the vehicle was off and Mike was left standing awkwardly and alone by the sidewalk, watching with growing dismay as the Blazer pulled out of the parking lot and quickly disappeared towards downtown Hawkins. It took another five minutes or so for the reality of the situation to sink in and, when it did, it hit him like a ton of bricks.

'I am so unbelievably fucked.'

Mike spent the rest of that afternoon experiencing what could only be properly described as a minor nervous breakdown.

El's birthday was on Monday. *His* El. His best friend, the girl he spent all of his free time with, the girl he had taken to Homecoming, the girl he was now at least 94% sure he was madly in love with. *Her*. Her birthday was on Monday.

And he had absolutely no idea what to do for her.

'Why the hell did she never mention it before?!' Mike found himself wondering as he hazardously rode his bike out of the school parking lot, not paying the slightest bit of attention to the rest of the traffic surrounding him. As such, it was only by swerving at the very last moment that he was able to narrowly avoid being run over as several juniors and seniors drove by, music blaring from their radios.

"Get the fuck out of the road, Wheeler!" one of drivers shouted as they drove past him.

"Get the fuck out of my life, Delfino!" Mike shouted back.

'Maybe birthdays aren't a big deal to El,' he reasoned as he made his way through downtown Hawkins on his way back home. *'Maybe she didn't get to celebrate her birthday when it was just her mother and her back in Indianapolis. Maybe she doesn't realize how important they are?'*

Which was a fine theory, except El explicitly mentioned she was excited to be turning fifteen, which meant she *clearly* understood at least the *significance* of a birthday.

'I wonder if she's ever had a party? Hell, I wonder if she's ever even gotten a present?' Mike's eyes widened in both horror and realization. *'Oh*

*god, I have to get her a present, don't I? I totally have to. I have to get her a present. What the hell am I supposed to get her? Sweet holy mother of Buddha, I have to do **something!***

Hell if he knew what, though.

By the time Mike made it back home and deposited his bike in its usual place (haphazardly on the front lawn, to be specific), he was little more than a bundle of twitching limbs and nervous energy. He tried completing his homework, but to no avail, as his mind only continued to distract him with the fact that *El's birthday is on Monday and he had no idea what he was going to do for her*. Eventually, Mike realized he simply wasn't going to come up with an answer all on his own. If he truly wanted to do something special for El, he would need outside help.

'I could try calling the Party back in Montauk,' Mike thought. But no, they would most likely already be in one of their basements playing Dungeons & Dragons, and he didn't want to interrupt. He didn't even know which basement they would be in!

'I wish I could ask Nancy, but she eloped with Steve Harrington, or went off to college, or got abducted by aliens, or something.' Mike honestly couldn't remember which.

Maybe Holly?

'Holly is six years old, Wheeler. Her idea of a good time involves smashing her dolls with a hammer to determine which is the most durable.'

His mother?

'She gave birth to you,' he reminded himself. *'Hasn't the poor woman suffered enough **already?**'*

And that's how Mike found himself actually asking his father for help.

'I am really scraping the bottom of the barrel here,' Mike thought to himself as he looked around the dining room table later that evening.

It was six o'clock and the entire Wheeler family was eating their usual Friday dinner of roast chicken and mashed potatoes. Though

both of his parents had dug right in the moment dinner began, and Holly appeared to be in the middle of constructing an elaborate pyramid of chicken bones and potato skins, Mike had barely touched his food, too busy trying to muster up the courage to actually address his father.

'When was the last time I actually initiated a conversation with Dad?' he wondered. 'Two...maybe three years ago? I wonder if he'll remember me. Well, here goes nothing.'

"Hey, Dad?" he asked, lifting his head so he could face the man sitting on the opposite end of the dining room table. "Can I ask you something?"

At this, two members of the family immediately looked up in confusion, but neither of them was Ted Wheeler. Rather, it was Karen and Holly, both of whom looked up from their meals with eyes wide with surprise, looking first at each other, then at Mike, and then at Ted, wondering what in the world was going on. Was Mike actually addressing his own father?

Unfortunately, Ted didn't seem to have heard, evidently taking too much pleasure in chewing to have even looked up at the sound of his son's voice.

"Uh, Dad?" Mike asked again, both eyebrows rising in concern. His father just kept on chewing.

'Well, this is going swimmingly.'

"Ted!" Karen finally exclaimed, kicking her husband lightly under the table. "Mike is asking for you!"

Startled, Ted finally looked up, blinking slowly as he stared at his wife. "Mike? Mike from work?"

'Good start.'

"Mike, your *son*," Karen answered him through gritted teeth, "sitting across from you."

"My son?" Ted asked, clearly still confused, his eyes widening as he

looked away, as if noticing the rest of his family at the table for the very first time that evening. "Oh! Oh, yes, of course! Mike! What can I do for you, son?"

'Kill me. Please.'

"Well, I was just wondering...what do you usually get Mom for her birthday?" Mike asked instead, deciding to start with something easy.

Ted Wheeler's eyes suddenly widened to almost comic proportions. "Oh god, did I miss it again?"

'Jesus Christ, Dad.'

"No, dear," Karen said with a sigh, now visibly losing faith, "my birthday was in May, just like it is every year. You got me a very nice bracelet, remember?"

"Ah, yes, of course," Ted said with a smile, clearly not remembering in the least. "There you go, son. Why do you ask?"

"Well...I just found out El's birthday is on Monday," Mike began, still pushing around his food with his fork instead of eating it, "and I guess I'm trying to figure out what to do for her."

Ted frowned. "Who is El?"

'Goddamn it, here we go.'

"El, from school?" Mike reminded him, already feeling the beginnings of a headache coming on. "Chief Hopper's daughter? My date to Homecoming?"

"Curly hair, brown eyes?" Karen tried.

"Mike's only friend?" Holly pitched in.

Ted shook his head. "No, not ringing a bell."

"You've met her so many times," Karen admitted, clearly just as distraught as her son.

"I feel like I would remember something like that, Karen," Ted said dryly, nonchalantly chewing on yet another piece of chicken.

"Look, she's my friend, and it's her birthday, and I just want to do something nice for her," Mike cut in, trying to steer the conversation back onto its original course. "Something big. Something special."

Ted frowned again. "Why, is she pregnant?"

"Ted!" Karen exclaimed, her eyes as wide as dinner plates.

"What? I'm only asking!"

"He's fifteen years old!"

"Fourteen, Mom," Mike reminded her.

"Fourteen years old!" Karen corrected herself, blushing lightly.

Ted paused, and blinked again. "...what's your point?"

'I regret every decision I ever made that led to this moment,' Mike thought to himself, burying his reddening face in his hands.

"She's not pregnant," he said out loud. "I just want to do something nice for her."

"See? That wasn't so hard, was it?" Ted commented, swallowing his chicken while his wife squeezed her eyes closed in exasperation. "So, you want to get your girl something special, is that it? That's very mature of you, Mark."

"Mike," Mike corrected him.

"Yes, that's what I said," his father replied, waving him off. "So, what to do, that's the question. How old are you, again?"

"Fourteen," Mike answered, right eye twitching once again, "as we just established."

"Right, so proposing is out."

"Jesus."

"Language, Matt!"

"Still Mike."

"I actually like Matt better," Holly chimed in with a smile.

'I'm going insane,' Mike thought to himself. *'I am literally going insane right now.'*

"As I was saying," Ted said a little louder, as if trying to reestablish dominance over a conversation he wasn't even aware he was a part of until just now, "is this girl important to you, son?"

"Yes," Mike said confidently, "she is."

"How important?"

Mike thought about it. He thought about how El was the only one to help him on the first day of school after Troy publically beat the shit out of him. He thought about how El stood beside him and helped him when he faced Troy during lunch the next day. He thought about how he had yelled at her and questioned her relationship, and yet she had refused to give up on him. He thought about how she called him in the middle of the night needing his help, and he'd felt no choice but to answer. He thought about how she had defended him throughout all of Freshman Beatdown Week, even going so far as to humiliate Troy and ensure he would never breed. He thought about how El had not only agreed to go to Homecoming with him, but had actually done so, and danced with him in her living room before the night had ended.

How important was El to him?

'Oh, she's just the most important person in the entire goddamn universe, why do you ask?'

"Very," he said out loud, answering at least. "Very, very important."

Ted nodded as sagely as he could with a mouthful of mashed potatoes. "Then whatever you do, you have to be sure it is *memorable*. The best moments in life are the ones that stick out from the rest. So, do something for her you wouldn't do for anyone else. Show her you

care."

Mike blinked. *'Holy shit, did Dad actually just give me some **good** advice?'*

"Do you understand me?" Ted asked, looking right at Mike and chewing his food slowly.

Mike nodded. "Yeah...yeah, I think so."

With that, Mike ignored the confused looks on the faces of his mother and sister and instead started shoveling his dinner into his mouth. He had a plan – okay, the *beginnings* of a plan – and he wanted to get to work on it right away. This wasn't going to be like any of his other plans either, he told himself. No chicken blood or glitter or wildfires this time. This plan would *work*, whether it wanted to or *not*.

'I might be a sarcastic, loud-mouthed asshole sometimes,' Mike thought to himself as he cleared his plate of mashed potatoes, *'but I'm a **considerate** asshole, by god!'*

Roughly thirty seconds later, Mike swallowed the last of his chicken, chugged down his entire glass of water, and was already getting up and depositing his dinner plate in the kitchen sink by the time anyone even noticed he was gone.

"Thanks, Mom, thanks, Dad, I'm going out, see you next week!" he shouted as he grabbed his hoodie and then barreled out the front door, slamming it closed behind him.

Back at the dining room table, Ted heard the front door slam and leaned over to his wife so he could finally ask the question that had been burning in his mind all evening.

"Seriously, Karen, who was that boy?"

Sunday, November 10th, 1985.

Mike sat back in his chair as he sighed in relief. After an entire weekend of scrounging around town looking for all of the necessary materials, and several more hours working in his room and in the basement to put it all together, El's birthday gift was finally complete.

It was small, sure, but it was *unique*, and Mike had a feeling that was more important to El than its size.

'And to think, it only cost me like three hundred dollars to get all the materials and put them together myself!' Mike thought to himself, smiling as he fingered his father's Premium Value credit card. *'God, I love America!'*

Mike's sense of accomplishment vanished almost immediately, however, when he looked to his alarm clock and noticed it was already 8 PM.

'Shit! What the hell have I been doing? El's probably been back for at least an hour by now!'

Hastily wrapping El's gift in some fancy paper he found lying around in Nancy's room, and using what was almost certainly *far* too much tape, Mike made his way downstairs and was then out the door before either of his parents even knew he had left his room.

Mike was pleased to see the chief's Blazer parked in the driveway of the Hopper residence as he pulled up five minutes later, bringing his bike to a slow stop and then leaving it leaning against the side of the garage, just as he always did. If the Blazer was back, it meant El and the chief were back. He could only hope Hopper would actually let him in!

'Okay, deep breaths, Wheeler,' he told himself as he knocked on the front door, announcing his presence to everyone within. *'It's just Chief Hopper. You've met him a billion times before. Plus, El says he **likes** you. So try **not** to think about the fact that he carries a gun, and totally caught you kissing his daughter on Homecoming night, and probably spends his shifts at work secretly hunting down the last remaining dinosaurs on earth so he can wrestle them to death and claim their skulls for trophies.'*

Mike gulped.

A moment later, the door opened, and there stood Chief Hopper.

'I wonder if they have Eggos in the afterlife.'

"Gee, look who it is," Hopper said sarcastically, lazily raising a single

eyebrow as if trying (but failing) to look the least bit shocked. "Mike Wheeler, standing on my doorstep. What a surprise."

"Uh, hi?" Mike replied. "Um, how are you on this fine Sunday evening, sir?"

"Oh, you know," Hopper began dryly, his eyes only about half-open as he spoke, "I just got back from a two hour drive through the middle of *nowhere* so I could be back in time for work in the morning because I spent the entire weekend in the middle of *everywhere* with a woman who doesn't remember who I am."

Mike nodded. "Yeah, I know how you feel. I totally stepped a Lego the other day."

'Good comparison, Wheeler. Gold star.'

"I'll bet you do," Hopper said with a roll of his weary eyes, before standing aside to make room for Mike to enter the premises. "Come on in, kid. Something tells me you aren't here to see me."

Mike obliged, giving another awkward smile as he stepped through the doorway and let the chief close the door behind him. He felt his hand instinctively go to his jacket pocket, where he had put El's hastily-wrapped birthday present, as if making sure it was still there.

'Maybe I should have just waited for school tomorrow...'

"You have any plans after school tomorrow, Wheeler?" Hopper suddenly asked out of nowhere, shaking Mike out of his own head.

'HOLY SHIT, HE'S A FUCKING MIND READER. HE'S A GUN-TOTING, DINOSAUR-SLAYING MIND READER. THIS WOULD BE SO TOTALLY COOL IF HE DIDN'T TOTALLY WANT TO KILL ME RIGHT NOW.'

"Huh? Me? Plans? No, why?" Mike responded after a second, before deciding he should probably elaborate. "I mean, to be honest, sir...I pretty much never have plans. And if I do have plans, they're probably with El, since she's, like, my only friend in the entire state. So, if I ever have any plans, it means El has plans, and I assume El talks to you since, you know, you guys live together, cuz you're her dad and everything, which is totally cool, by the way, but it means

that if I had any plans, it's only because she has plans, and if she had any plans, she would probably tell you, so you would totally already know about them. Sir."

Hopper blinked. "So...no plans for tomorrow, then?"

"No, sir."

'Goddamn it, Wheeler.'

"Good, then that means you can come over for some cake and ice cream," Hopper confirmed. "I assume Eleanor told you it's her birthday?"

"She did," Mike replied, swallowing loudly, "on Friday."

Hopper chuckled. "Yeah, that sounds like her. I asked if she wanted me to invite anyone else – literally *anyone* else – but apparently you were the only name on her list."

Mike did everything in his power not to smile like a goober when he heard that, but it didn't stop his heart from fluttering in his chest or his cheeks from turning a rather fantastic shade of scarlet.

"That's, um...actually why I'm here," Mike finally spoke up, fighting the blush quickly spreading across his face. "I wanted to give El her birthday present early, before I inevitably find some way to lose it, or crush it, or set it on fire. I mean, if that's okay with you...sir."

Hopper raised a single eyebrow. "Now you're asking for my permission, huh?"

'Oh, so this is what we're gonna do tonight, we're gonna fight.'

Mike gulped. "Okay, so, to be fair, Chief Hopper, sir, that kiss you saw was *at least* 80% gravity."

"Was it, now?"

"Okay, maybe 70%, but still!"

"Uh-huh."

"Look, I'm sorry, it just *happened!*" Mike finally exclaimed, losing what little cool he had. "We were at Homecoming and El wasn't feeling well, so we came back, but she said she wanted to keep dancing, so I rooted through some of your records and started playing some music and next thing I know we're dancing, and it's awesome, and El's like the prettiest girl in the world, as I have already described to you, *at length*, and she was looking at me, and I was looking at her, and she asked me to kiss her, and I did it, I went for it, I admit it, there, I confess, please don't kill me, Chief Hopper, sir, I'm still way too young to die!"

*'Not the **best** deathbed confession ever, but it will have to do.'*

Hopper just shook his head. "You ever pass out from lack of breath, kid?"

"More times that I care to admit, sir."

"Look, I'm not mad at you, Mike," Hopper began, before taking a look at Mike's expression and pausing. "Okay, I am mad at you. But I don't want you to get the wrong idea here. I like you, kid, I really do. So, just...be straight with me. Are you two dating?"

'Fuck if I know!'

"No, sir," Mike said, before pausing himself, and then continuing, "at least...I don't *think* so, sir?"

"You don't think so?"

'And here we go again...'

Mike shrugged, trying to ignore the fact that his face was growing redder and hotter every second. "It's...complicated. We're friends. Like, we hang out and we eat lunch together and we talk all the time and rely on each other and stuff, but then sometimes...we kiss. Not a lot! Totally not a lot! But sometimes. And it's...confusing. But El's my friend and I really care about her and I know she cares about me and honestly, I just like being around her. Like, when I'm with her, I don't feel like a total wastoid loser who doesn't know when to shut the hell up, like I'm totally being right now, I just kinda feel like...me. If that

makes any sense. Sir."

'It doesn't, Wheeler, but thanks for trying. Exit's to the left.'

Mike wasn't sure if anything he had just said honestly made any sense to Hopper, but the look in the man's eyes told him the chief was at least *trying* to understand what he had just heard. There was a softened expression on the chief's face, nothing so far as a smile or a look of relief, but at least a lessening of the usually rock-hard barriers he built around himself on a daily basis.

"Okay, I think I get it," Hopper said at last, sighing as he did so. "I don't *understand* it...but I *get* it. You two are close. Just...try to keep all that *other* stuff out of my house, will you? And definitely don't do it in front of me. Fair enough?"

Mike nodded furiously, considering any compromise that didn't include bodily dismemberment or electroshock therapy to be more than reasonable. "Yes, sir. Very fair. Super fair."

"And," Hopper began, making damn sure he was looking Mike right in the eye as he spoke, "it goes without saying that if I ever find out you hurt her, or pressured her into doing something she's uncomfortable with – "

"They'll never find my body?" Mike finished with a gulp. "Sir?"

Hopper smiled. "Good boy. Glad to hear we understand each other. Now, go on upstairs. I'm sure Eleanor will be happy to see you. But remember what I said."

"No kissing?" Mike squeaked. "Or else?"

"That's right. No kissing. Or else."

Mike nodded. "Or else."

And with that, Mike turned and quickly made his way up the stairs, Hopper's words bouncing around endlessly in his head.

'OR ELSE, WHEELER.'

Mike stopped in front of El's room to find her door locked and knocked politely before trying to open it. Years of living with Nancy had taught Mike to never, ever, *ever* simply barge into a teenage girl's room without asking, a lesson he had been forced to learn several times over before it finally sank in permanently. It was particularly unfortunate that so many of those 'lessons' with Nancy had also featured guest appearances by Steve Harrington.

("Hey, Nancy?" thirteen-year-old Mike had asked as he pushed open the door to his older sister's bedroom and simply walked in. "Could you help me with my – oh, sweet mother of god, *my eyes!*"

"Mike?!" Nancy squealed, her eyes widening as she turned to see her younger brother watching her and Steve from the open doorway. "What are you doing?!"

"What am *I* doing? What are *you* doing?" Mike countered, visibly horrified.

"Um, well, you see..."

"No, seriously, that looks ridiculously uncomfortable. What do you even *call* that position?")

"Yes?" Mike heard El shout through the closed door.

"Hey, it's Mike!" he responded, smiling even though he knew she couldn't see him. There was some shuffling around and, a moment later, the door was pulled open to reveal El standing there with a smile on her face. Her curly hair was still wet, indicating she had showered recently, and she was already dressed in her flannel pajamas.

"Mike!" she said, beaming as she threw her arms around him. "I missed you."

*'Did Hopper say anything about hugging? Oh god, please tell me he didn't say anything about **hugging!**'*

"I missed you, too," Mike replied around the lump in his throat, ultimately deciding that hugging didn't break the rules as he responded with a small hug of his own. "Sorry, I know it's kinda late.

I just...wanted to stop by and see you before school tomorrow. You're not busy, are you?"

El shook her head as she drew back, leading the way back into her bedroom. "Not busy. Just finishing some homework. You can help me, if you want."

"Gotta earn my keep somehow," Mike said with a smile, only half-jokingly.

He watched as El passed by the desk with all of her books and papers lying on it, however, and instead sat down on the edge of her bed, looking up at him expectantly. It was another one of El's nonverbal cues, Mike had learned, asking him to come join her. He did so, immediately worried that there was something bothering her, and a fairly good idea of what it was already forming in his head.

"How was your mother?" he ventured, looking over at her from his spot beside her on the mattress.

El shook her head again. "Not good. Hospital."

'Oh, shit.'

"Is she okay?" Mike asked, his eyes widening in concern, before he realized how absolutely stupid that sounded. "I mean, if she's in the hospital, obviously she's not *okay*, but...is she okay otherwise? Like, why is she in the hospital? Because my mom takes Holly to the hospital every time she so much as sneezes, which is actually pretty rude now that I think about it, considering I tend to have at least three broken ribs every time I come home from school and she doesn't even give me a Band-Aid, but that's not the point, the point is your mom is in the hospital and I want to know if she's okay. Or...going to be okay. Or...yeah. Shutting up now."

'First thing I'm gonna do when I get home tonight?' Mike thought to himself. *'Cut out my fucking vocal chords, because this is getting goddamn ridiculous.'*

But El just smiled softly at him, as she always did. "It's okay, Mike. But...*she* isn't. Mama, I mean. She isn't okay."

"What's wrong with her?" Mike asked, frowning with legitimate concern.

"Coma," El said softly, as if it was a new word, a dangerous word, one she was afraid to say aloud, as though that somehow gave it new strength. "Mama's been sick for a long time. That's why they took me away, why she had to stay with my Aunt Becky. But on Friday...Aunt Becky couldn't wake her up. Now she's in the hospital, but she still won't wake up. And...the doctors don't think she ever will."

Mike felt his eyes widen. "How...how long does she have? Did they say?"

El shrugged, which was all the answer Mike needed.

"I'm so sorry, El," he began, speaking softly and suddenly feeling all kinds of awkward. He felt like he was supposed to say something else, something more, but (for once) Mike Wheeler couldn't seem to come up with anything to say that could properly express how he was feeling other than 'sorry.'

'What more is there to say?' he thought to himself.

"Um, how are *you*?" he finally asked instead.

"I'm...okay," El answered after a brief pause and, oddly enough, Mike believed her. Her breathing was steady, there were no tears in her eyes, and all about her was a strange calm, a powerful and radical acceptance of what was. "I think I knew this was coming. She's hurting, Mike. She's been hurting for so long. And I miss her so much, but...I don't want her to hurt anymore. Even if it means she's..."

"Gone?" Mike tried, finishing for her as she trailed off.

El nodded. "Yeah. Gone."

The two just sat there on El's bed for a few moments, heads bowed and unable to look the other in the eye, the weight of the current topic too heavy for either of them to bear alone. When El suddenly felt Mike's hand covering her own and his fingers slowly intertwining with hers, she finally glanced up to find him looking at her with a small smile and a kind look in his eyes.

"Hey," he said softly, as if somehow afraid of upsetting her if he spoke any louder, "you want a surprise?"

And, despite everything, El found herself smiling. "Yes, please."

She watched as Mike reached into one of his jacket pockets and finally pulled out the present he had been working on all weekend. It was the size and shape of a small box, she observed, but haphazardly wrapped in colorful paper and covered in an ungodly amount of scotch tape, as though Mike had been afraid the entire thing would collapse in on itself if El had even the *slightest* chance of opening the gift without the aid of an industrial-strength buzzsaw.

"I, uh, know it's technically a day early," Mike began, handing the poorly-wrapped gift to El, who accepted it with open palms and widened eyes, "but I couldn't wait. And after the weekend you had, I figure...what the hell, right? So, um, here you go."

El blinked as she looked down at the present in her hands. "For me?"

"For you," Mike confirmed with a small smile. "Happy Birthday, El."

It took El a while to unwrap the present (not surprising, considering Mike used enough tape to successfully reassemble and hold together the goddamn Titanic), but once the tape and paper were lying on the carpet, she found herself looking at a small jewelry box about four inches in both length and width. With a smile that told Mike she was already feeling better, El opened the box to reveal the true gift within: a simple (but remarkably detailed) charm bracelet.

The bracelet itself was merely a series of tiny steel ringlets Mike had managed to link together while working in the basement, having 'borrowed' a few of his father's tools from the garage. The most important aspects of the bracelet, at least as far as Mike was concerned, were the seven accompanying 'charms': a human tooth, oddly shaped and bloodied along the edge; an acorn; a seemingly ordinary pebble; a keychain of a stylized letter 'M'; a random key; a ticket stub; and a small gold charm emblazoned with the number '11.'

"I kind spent all weekend putting it together," Mike clarified. "I, uh... made it myself."

'Yeah, no shit, Sherlock, it looks like it was put together by colorblind chimpanzees.'

"What is it?" El asked, not rudely, her eyes wide as she lifted the bracelet out of the box to get a better look at it.

"It's a charm bracelet," Mike explained, suddenly feeling very self-conscious. "For your birthday. Each charm is meant to represent something, to remind you of the good times. Like, the good times here in Hawkins. Um...with me. Specifically."

El smiled as she slowly put the bracelet on, marveling at how well and how easily it seemed to fit around her right wrist despite the cool touch of the metal ringlets. She took a moment to look it over, still smiling softly, before turning back to Mike and gesturing to the bracelet.

"Tell me," she said, putting her hand in his so he could better explain. "Tell me about the charms. All of them. I want to know."

Wordless for what might have been the first time in his entire life, Mike simply smiled and nodded, taking El's hand in his so he could hold it to point out each of the charms, one-by-one, and explain their significance.

"Okay, so, *this* one," he said, pointing to the oddly-shaped tooth, "is actually from the first day we met. You remember how Troy beat me up right before you found me? Well, he actually punched out one of my wisdom teeth. And, um, this is it. So, it's here to remind you of how we met, I guess. But now that I think about it, it's kinda creepy, considering I'm literally giving you something that lived in my mouth for fourteen years."

'Holy shit, that is pretty fucking creepy, isn't it?'

"It's sweet," El said with a small smile as she looked at the next 'charm.' "And this?"

"An acorn, from our lunch tree," Mike explained, blushing lightly. "It's where I found you on the second day of school. You forgot your lunch, so we shared some of my leftover pizza, remember? Honestly,

it was only because you were there with me that I was able to stand up to Troy that day instead of having my ass handed to me, like usual. So...yeah. Acorn."

El laughed, then moved on to the next charm. "A rock?"

*'Wheeler, you are the **only** person who would ever give a girl a fucking rock as part of her birthday present.'*

"It's one of the rocks I threw at your window back in September," Mike went on, now feeling a little embarrassed. "You know, after we...fought? I made you cry, so I came running over in the rain and spent like half an hour throwing rocks at windows trying to get your attention because I forgot which house was yours."

"The Jeffersons next door still don't like you," El commented, laughing gently. "And neither do the Delfinos three doors down."

"Yeah, well, the Delfinos can *eat* me."

'Fucking Delfinos.'

"I know this one," El said suddenly, looking at the stylized 'M' keychain that represented the fourth charm. "Metallica!"

"From the first time I ever sang you one of their songs," Mike confirmed. "You called me over in the middle of the night and I was so sure the chief was going to strangle me in your bed when he found out. I'm still not certain he won't."

"I told you, he likes you," El repeated, notable moving a little closer to Mike as she continued to glance down at her bracelet. She lifted up the key next, staring at it, as if she might recognize it if she looked at it long enough. "What's this?"

Mike definitely blushed at that one. "It's, um...it's one of the custodian's keys from school. It opens the supply closet."

El frowned, not comprehending. "What supply closet?"

"The closet you used to hide me during the last day of Freshman Beatdown Week?" Mike attempted to clarify, literally feeling his

cheeks catch fire every second we spoke. "The closet where we, uh... kissed?"

*'You **made out** with her is what you did, and it was fucking **awesome**.'*

At that, El finally blushed too, biting her lip as redness quickly spread across her face. "Oh. That closet."

"Yeah," Mike said, laughing awkwardly. "That closet."

Without another word, El moved on to the ticket stub and smiled, recognizing it immediately. "Your Homecoming ticket?"

Mike nodded. "I know things didn't exactly go as planned – like, at all – but I still really enjoyed going with you. Dancing with you. All of it, really. And...and I hope you'll consider maybe going with me again next year? Maybe?"

El giggled. "Maybe. If you promise not to step on my foot again."

'Fair enough.'

Finally, El turned to the last of the charms, a single metal circle, gold in color, with the number 11 emblazoned across it like someone's name on a trophy. It was, by a fairly wide margin, the most expensive part of the entire bracelet, despite its simple design, it being a genuine piece of jewelry that Mike had purchased at Melvald's and had stylized right then and there, courtesy of his father's credit card.

'What he doesn't know won't hurt him,' Mike thought to himself as he remembered how much that single charm had cost. *'Besides, I got it 50% off! He should be proud of me!'*

"Eleven?" El asked after a moment, evidently giving up on trying to determine its significance. "What does 'eleven' mean?"

"It's your birthday," Mike told her, holding the charm just right so the light revealed the number emblazoned on the gold-colored metal. "November 11th. Eleven/eleven. Plus, you're El! El for Eleanor, or El for Eleven."

'So goddamn stupid.'

"El for Eleven," El whispered slowly, as if the words were somehow familiar to her, as if she'd heard them before in another time, another place, another universe. "I like that."

'Okay, maybe not so stupid.'

"So, um...do you like it?" Mike asked at last, unable to bear the burden of waiting for her response any longer.

At the sound of his voice, El seemed to snap out of a trance, finally looking away from her brand new bracelet so she could instead look at Mike, and the smile on her face was answer enough.

"I love it," El answered softly, tears of what Mike hoped to be joy gleaming at the edges of her eyes. "Thank you."

*'Whatever you do, do **not** kiss her,'* Mike reminded himself as he suddenly found his eyes focusing on El's beautiful smile, the tears in her eyes, the look of pure happiness that was positively radiating off her. *'If you value your life **at all**, Wheeler, you **will not** kiss the pretty girl! Hopper is **right downstairs**. He will **know**. He **always** knows. He's like a scary, dinosaur-slaying god.'*

"I have something for you, too," El said suddenly, shaking Mike out of his daydreams.

"For me?" Mike asked, genuinely confused. "But...it's *your* birthday. You don't have to give *me* anything."

"I want to," El said with a shrug, a mischievous smile suddenly overtaking her soft features as she fingered the charm bracelet now wrapped around her wrist. "Close your eyes."

Mike frowned. "Close my eyes?"

"Close your eyes," El repeated, her voice even softer but somehow also more confident.

'What could possibly go wrong?'

So, Mike closed his eyes. A second later, he shivered lightly as he felt El reach up and take his face in her hands, her warm palms pressing up against his reddening cheeks.

*'She's either going to kiss me or headbutt me,' Mike predicted with stunning accuracy. 'I hope she doesn't headbutt me, I've already had **way** too many concussions, one more and I'm probably going to start losing brain cells. Oh, god, what if she headbutts me and it turns out I'm totally **into** it? How the hell am I supposed to explain that? Jesus Christ, I'm doomed. What do I do, what do I do, what do I –'*

*' – oh, no, crisis averted. She's kissing me. **Awesome.**'*

It was *more* than awesome, Mike decided as he felt El's lips slowly and suddenly press against his, his face in her hands as she held him close, as if there was even the slightest fucking chance he was going to pull away. On the contrary, it only took a second before Mike was kissing her back, Hopper's threats being unceremoniously pushed to the back of his mind as he hesitantly reached up and placed a hand on the small of El's back, causing her to shiver pleasantly into their kiss.

Like every kiss the two of them shared, this one felt unique in some way, special, different from all the preceding ones, yet with an almost familiar similarity. Whether it was El's hands on his cheeks, or her lips on his, or simply the surprise and ceremony of it all, Mike couldn't decide. What he *did* decide was that this kiss was extraordinary in a way he very much liked. It was exceptional. It might even be, dare he say it, *perfect*?

Yes, Mike decided, as he returned El's kiss with all the fervor he could muster, suddenly feeling better than he had all weekend. It was perfect.

"What the hell is this?!"

Or, at least, it was perfect until Hopper's rage-filled voice brought the kiss to an early end. Their eyes shot open and both teenagers pulled apart as though shocked, turning simultaneously to find the chief of police standing in El's open doorway and glaring at them with an expression that toed the line somewhere between all-consuming

outrage and chronic constipation.

"Goddamn it, Wheeler!" Hopper exclaimed angrily, his face already turning so red it looked like he was about to burst. "What did we literally *just* talk about?!"

Mike gulped. "Sorry?"

'Still fucking worth it.'

A/N: How long can Mike successfully evade his inevitable death at the hands of Jim Hopper the Dinosaur Slayer? The world may never know.

Be sure to leave some kudos, comments, or reviews, and I'll see everyone next time for our final (official) chapter!

8. Mike Spills His Guts

A/N: I simply couldn't hold it back anymore, folks, so here it is: the final chapter.

This chapter was difficult to write, not just because of the subject matter, but because I know this means our story is coming to an end. I've had a blast writing this fanfic, and I would like to thank each and every one of you for letting me know how much you've enjoyed reading it.

I would also like to thank the folks over on Fanfiction who award this tale not one, but TWO Stranger Things Levoes Awards for "Best Humor Story" and "Best Mike Story." Who knew you guys would love Loudmouth!Mike so much?

Without further ado, I present to you: Mike Spills His Guts.

Tuesday, December 3rd, 1985.

Mike Wheeler fucking hated funerals.

Not that you're supposed to enjoy funerals, of course; he realized that. Everyone hates funerals. But Mike *really* hated funerals. He hated the bland food, he hated having to wear a tie, he hated meeting people, and he especially hated the fact that someone literally had to fucking *die* to bring all these people together in the first place. As far as Mike was concerned, funerals were basically high school parties with less alcohol, more social interaction, and the assurance that at least one person was already dead *before* the party started.

Nevertheless, a funeral was exactly where Mike found himself on the dreary, rainy morning of Tuesday, December 3rd, his parents having allowed him to take the day off school so he could attend. And, while he would surely have been bitching and moaning about being present were it any other funeral and under any other circumstances, for this one service, Mike managed to keep his overall resentment towards funerals in check long enough to at least *pretend* he knew how to behave like a decent human being. The reason for Mike's incredible

tolerance in this one instance was also the only reason he was there in the first place: El.

She stood beside him on the wet green grass, one hand holding his and the other clutching Hopper's, her grip tightening with every passing moment. She was wearing an ill-fitting black dress that had clearly been bought last-minute, and her hair was combed in the same fashion as it had been for Homecoming, this time pulled back and out of her eyes not by product but by a black hairband. Under any other circumstance, her vacant expression and the tears in her eyes would have sent Mike into a state of nervous panic as he tried to simultaneously ascertain what was wrong and how to make her feel better, probably with mixed results. As mentioned before, however, these were most certainly *not* ordinary circumstances, since Mike already knew what was wrong, and that was the reason they were here in the first place.

On the morning of Saturday, November 30th, El's mother, Terry Ives, had passed away.

She had gone peacefully, Mike had been told, and without any pain. It had only been a matter of time, according to the doctors, considering the condition she had been in for the last weeks and months. Not that such information had been of much comfort to those who had known her.

*'Doesn't change the fact that she came down with a sudden and chronic case of **death**,*' Mike thought to himself upon hearing the news, before berating himself for even thinking such a thing. *'Christ, Wheeler, at least **pretend** to have some common human decency.'*

Three days later, in the wee hours of the morning, Hopper had picked Mike up in his Blazer, and then the three of them embarked on a two-hour journey to Indianapolis in order to attend the funeral. Mike had only really been half-dressed at the time, having slept through his alarm because he was, well, *Mike*, but Hopper was understanding and had even helped him sort everything out properly when they finally got to the service.

"It's...really tight," Mike gasped as Hopper adjusted his tie so Mike could at least *pass* for presentable. "Uh, sir."

"I know, kid," Hopper admitted almost regretfully, tightening the damn thing further still. "But that's okay. It's supposed to be a little tight."

"If this is revenge for any of those kisses you walked in on, I've already apologized like eight hundred times," Mike said, still stretching his neck in hopes of finding an angle in which he could properly breath through the fabric noose now tied around his throat.

"You've also promised it won't happen again eight hundred times, but that hasn't exactly worked out, has it?" Hopper reminded him. Then he smiled softly. "Thanks for doing this, Mike. I know it's gotta be awkward as hell. You didn't even know her."

"It's important to El," Mike told him after a brief hesitation, "so it's important to me."

Hopper nodded. "You're a good kid, Wheeler. Don't ever let me say otherwise."

'*Holy shit,*' Mike had thought at the time, his eyes widening as the chief straightened himself out and led the way to the service, '*Did Hopper the Dinosaur Slayer just pay me a compliment? He must be **really** upset right now!*'

And that's how Mike found himself standing in the middle of an Indianapolis cemetery, hanging onto El with one hand and holding up a huge umbrella with the other. The day had been gray and dreary since sunrise, but it wasn't until the three had arrived in Indianapolis that the clouds had opened up and unleashed their pent-up fury, as if even they were upset by the passing of Terry Ives. As such, Mike spent most of his time trying to make sure the umbrella was big enough to cover both himself and El from the seemingly nonstop torrents of rain. There were only a handful of people in attendance aside from them, including El's Aunt Becky, who was by far the most distraught of the few mourners.

Hopper himself had remained largely stoic throughout the service, with only the faintest glimmer of tears in his eyes on one or two occasions. Which made sense, Mike realized, considering Hopper probably didn't even remember who Terry Ives *was* until six months

ago. As such, most of the chief's attention seemed to be paid to El rather than to the funeral itself, with him constantly checking on her out of the corner of his eye.

And El? El seemed lost, as if she was walking through a fog and could only barely see or hear or understand anything around her. She walked where she was led and spoke when others spoke to her, but the usual light in her eyes was gone and her smiles had all but vanished. Either the reality of her mother's death had not yet set in, Mike figured, or else it had driven her straight into a mild state of shock.

'Probably the latter,' Mike decided. *'You know, all things considered.'*

The funeral went by in a whirlwind of sad words and short speeches and mourning attendees giving their condolences to the (still largely unresponsive) daughter of the deceased and the man who had sired her. The coffin was lowered, hands were shaken, and then the three of them were heading back to the Blazer for their return trip to Hawkins.

"You okay?" Mike asked El as Hopper led their way out of the cemetery. "I mean...obviously you're not *okay*, considering what's going on and where we are and why we're here. But, like, are you okay *overall*? Because if you're not okay, it's totally fine. I mean...it's not *fine*, obviously, but it's understandable. I mean, it would be totally insane if you *were* okay, right? Not that I'm saying you're insane, because you're not! I just mean that it's totally understandable if you're *not* okay, all things considered, but it's also totally understandable if you are *okay*, since obviously I'm asking if you're okay, because I want you to be okay, because you're my friend and I care about you and stuff. Um...okay?"

'Jesus Christ, Wheeler, for someone who literally doesn't know when to shut the hell up, you really don't how to actually fucking talk, do you?'

But El just smiled her small, sad smile, the one she had used ever since she first heard the news of her mother's death Sunday morning.

"It's okay, Mike," she said softly, her voice barely more than a whisper. "Thank you."

She didn't speak again until the three of them had reached the Blazer and Mike and Hopper were both struggling to close their umbrellas and put them away before the torrential downpour managed to soak through their suits and fuse them to their skin.

"Can I sit with Mike on the way back?" she suddenly asked, gently tugging on Hopper's sleeve as he opened the passenger door for her. She was referring to the backseat, where Mike had been (awkwardly) sitting on the drive up, while Hopper and El took the front.

"Sure, kiddo," Hopper said, closing the door with a shrug. "But I have a rearview mirror and I know how to use it. So no funny business back there, got it?"

"No funny business," El confirmed with a nod, either not understanding Hopper's teasing or not bothering to acknowledge it as she turned and instead followed Mike into the backseat, gently pushing him into the middle so she could sit on the right.

Once in the Blazer, Hopper gave Mike a pointed look as the fourteen-year-old attempted to buckle himself into the middle seat, and Mike knew what he was communicating without even having to open his mouth and ask.

'No funny business, Wheeler!'

Mike straightened his back and saluted dramatically in response, inadvertently letting go of his seatbelt and causing the buckle to fling back up and smack him in the face, resulting in (yet another) bloody nose. Thankfully, El hadn't noticed, busy buckling her own seatbelt, but Hopper had, his only response being a weary roll of the eyes before he started the car.

*'At the rate I keep busting up my nose, I'm going to end up a **permanent** mouth-breather by the time I turn fifteen,'* Mike lamented sadly, wiping away some of the blood leaking from both nostrils. *'There's probably some irony in there I'm not appreciating.'*

A moment later, all three of them were properly buckled in, and they were heading back to Hawkins. Much like the journey to Indianapolis, the return trip was largely silent. Hopper focused on the

road ahead, every now and then taking the time to mess with the radio in search of some background noise that didn't involve politics (which none of them particularly cared for) or the weather (which was largely unnecessary at this point). El spent most of the trip staring out of her window, watching the rain fall as houses and offices and other cars passed by on the regular. Mike, meanwhile, took the opportunity to sit in the middle of the backseat twiddling his thumbs like the awkward piece of shit he was.

About half an hour into the drive, however, Mike looked up as he felt El shifting in her seat beside him. As he watched, she removed the top strip of her seatbelt and let it fall behind her, providing her with more room to move. This achieved, she scooted over until she was sitting hip-to-hip with Mike and, without even asking, grabbed his right arm and wrapped it around her shoulders. A moment later, she was cuddling onto him, her hands clutching his button-up shirt and her face pressed into his chest.

"Okay?" she asked, looking up at him, as though for permission.

'Definitely okay,' he thought to himself.

Instead, he just nodded and smiled at her, tightening his arm around her shoulders in order to pull her closer. Mike didn't even need to glance up to know the chief was glaring at him through the rearview mirror, evidently already suspicious of potential 'funny business' occurring in the backseat. The chief needn't have worried, however, as El was asleep ten minutes later, her head having gently slipped down Mike's chest until she was practically napping in his lap.

'And I didn't even have to sing Metallica or anything,' Mike realized as he gently rubbed her back, feeling her breathing steady as she dozed. *'I'm almost disappointed.'*

With El fast asleep and Hopper busy maneuvering through rainy traffic ("Christ Almighty, don't any of you city slickers know how to fucking *drive?*"), Mike took the opportunity to look at the girl slumbering in his lap. He smiled as her right hand jerked slightly, revealing she was still wearing the charm bracelet he had given her for her birthday, creepy tooth and all. Though there were still fresh tears gleaming at the edges of her closed eyelids, the rest of her face

looked remarkably relaxed, for which Mike was grateful, as it represented at least a temporary return to normalcy for her.

'She always looks so peaceful when she's sleeping,' Mike thought to himself before realizing the oddness of such a thought. Sure, he had only seen her sleeping a few times before, but even then he had noticed how amazingly calm and content she had appeared once the stressors and tensions of the day had left her and she gave herself over entirely to slumber, as if sleep was the one place in which nothing could hurt her.

"She's gonna need you now more than ever, kid."

Mike started, looking up and away from El to find Hopper staring back at him through the rearview mirror, the traffic having evidently cleared up enough for the chief to chance a look into the backseat. It took Mike another moment to realize Hopper was speaking to him.

"You know that, right?" the chief asked. "She's gonna need you to be there for her. Just like with her episodes. I know that's asking a lot of you, more than I should ever ask of a kid your age, but you said you're in this for the long run, so I'm holding you to that."

"I'm not going anywhere, sir," Mike confirmed, before looking back down at El again. "She's...going to be okay, isn't she?"

Hopper sighed loudly. "She will be, but she's gonna need time. It's a lot to process, a lot to take in all at once, and I don't think it's fully sunk in yet."

"She told me she knew this was coming," Mike told him, still looking down at El. "Like she was expecting it, almost."

"I think we all were, a little bit," Hopper admitted, eyes back on the road. "But expecting something and being prepared for it are two very different things. And you're never fully prepared for something like this."

Mike nodded sadly, remembering his grandmother's death almost four years ago. She hadn't remembered him by the end, but he sure as hell remembered her: he remembered the family driving to her

house every Christmas, the way her kitchen always smelled like baked cookies, the stories she would tell Mike and Holly and Nancy about their grandfather, stories that always left Karen feeling flabbergasted and embarrassed. He remembered how long it had taken for her to pass once the cancer got really bad, how they all knew it was coming, how they had all been *expecting* it, but still weren't ever fully prepared for it when it finally came.

Mike had fucking hated that funeral, too, but for a different reason.

"Can I ask you something?" he suddenly said, glancing up from El last in order to look at the chief. "Something...personal? Sir?"

"Considering my daughter is asleep in your lap and my hands aren't around your throat?" Hopper replied with a sardonic smile and laughing a little when he saw how red Mike's face got. "Yeah, I'd say we're close enough you can ask me something. Shoot."

"Well, it's about Ms. Ives," Mike went on. "Uh, El's mother."

"Uh-huh?"

"The one who just died."

"Yeah, kid, I got that."

"Well, did you..." Mike trailed off, suddenly embarrassed and regretting bringing the subject up in the first place.

"Come on, Mike, spit it out."

"Did you love her?" Mike finally blurted out, his cheeks turning a bright red almost immediately. "I mean, like...*emotionally*? Were you in love with her? Like, I know you loved her *physically* and stuff, that's how El got here, I understand how all that works. Well, I mean, I think I have a good *general idea* of how all that works, my parents haven't exactly given me the Talk or anything like that, but I have cable, so, you know, I see stuff and I'm usually pretty good about putting two and two together. Not that El and I are putting two and two together, because we're totally not, we're totally way too young, so you don't have to worry about that for *at least* another couple of years or so! Uh, not that you have to worry about that *at all* since

we're not dating or anything and I would never, ever, ever do something like that because I'm a responsible young man and you're the chief of police and I kinda like being alive!"

'Oh my god.'

"Christ, Wheeler."

"Too much?"

"Yeah. Too much."

'Fuck.'

"You want to know if I was in love with Terry?" Hopper finally asked, evidently choosing to disregard pretty much everything Mike had said following that, for which Mike was eternally thankful.

"Um, well...yeah."

There was a pause and, for a moment, Mike was concerned he had crossed a line. Not that he hadn't already toed, pushed, or otherwise fucking *shattered* dozens of lines by now when it came to his relationship with El and her father, but never before had he been trapped in a car alone with the man in the middle of the interstate. Thankfully, when Hopper spoke again, it wasn't to admonish Mike, but to answer him, and as truthfully as possible.

"To be honest, kid?" Hopper began. "I didn't even remember who she was until the state gave me a call and told me I had a daughter with her."

'Oh.'

"I was barely more than a kid myself back then," the chief went on, "and twice as stupid. I had just come back from the war and I didn't have a damn clue what I was going to do with my life. After everything I saw overseas...I was just happy to be alive at all. I was a bit of party animal. And I met *a lot* of women...if you know what I mean."

Mike had a pretty good idea what he meant.

"Terry – Eleanor's mother – was one of those women," Hopper explained. "We hung out for a little while, had some good times, and then I was off with someone else and doing the whole thing all over again. I don't think I gave her a second thought until about six months ago. I'm not proud of that, not one bit, but it's the truth."

'*Damn,*' Mike thought to himself with a frown, once again looking down at the girl sleeping in his lap. '*He didn't even remember her. They had a child together – they had **El** together – and they barely even knew each other. How is that even **possible**?*'

It wasn't often that Mike was thankful for his family (all things considered), but he certainly felt grateful right then and there as he thought about what growing up must have been like for El. Sure, he had a rough time now and then, but he still had both his parents, not to mention his sisters. El had her mother and, for fourteen years, that was it. No father. No siblings. No friends. Just El and her Mama.

'*Sure, Mom's busy all the time, and Holly is irritating as hell, and Dad barely remembers who I am,*' Mike considered, '*but at least they're **there**. I'm used to being **lonely**, but I'm not actually alone. Not like El was.*'

And that was when Mike pledged to ensure El never felt alone ever again. Even if it meant biking her to and from school every day, or walking her to and from class every hour, or camping out in a tent in her backyard like a total freaking weirdo just in case she had a nightmare or an episode, he was going to do it. She was his friend, his best friend – sometimes his *only* friend – and he would do anything for her.

'*If she really does need me now more than ever, then I'll **be there** for her more than ever,*' Mike swore as he smiled down at her, absentmindedly brushing aside a strand of her hair as sighed in her sleep and cuddled closer still into his lap. '*I fucking swear it.*'

Hopper told Mike that El was going to need some time. She needed time to adjust, time for the reality of her mother's death to sink in, time for her to come to terms with what had happened and find a way to move on from there. And Mike did an admirable job for the first few days, keeping himself from asking how she was feeling or bothering her constantly about what was on her mind. He gave her

the space she needed, and was careful not to push or prod or pry.

Sure, he and El still had class together and ate lunch together and hung out after school, but Mike could tell there was a barrier between them that hadn't existed prior to her mother's death. She spoke even less than was usual for her, and had a tendency to withdraw into herself and avoid pretty much social interaction whatsoever, be it with Mike or with anyone else. She had even been zoning out quite a bit, sometimes even while Mike was in the middle of talking to her.

(Not that *that* was particularly unusual; Mike had grown quite accustomed to people tuning him out while he was talking, it tended to happen all the time, but he couldn't remember *El* ever tuning him out before.)

(Also, she hadn't kissed him in over a week, and that totally *sucked*!)

In short, El wasn't acting like herself, and that worried Mike.

"Well, the chief said she needed time, so just give her time," Will told him on Saturday, December 7th, during his weekly phone call. "It's only been like four days. Be patient."

"I am patient! I'm, like, super patient!" Mike complained in response, groaning into the receiver all the while. "I'm like the most patient person to ever patiently wait for anything, ever!"

"I really hope that's sarcasm I'm hearing."

"Sarcasm? *Sarcasm*? I legitimately have no idea what you're talking about!"

"Okay, *that* statement might actually have been honest."

Mike sighed and rolled his eyes. "What the hell are you talking about, Byers?"

"What I'm *talking* about is that you're like the *least* patient person to ever *impatiently* wait for anything! Ever!" Will retorted, sounding more exasperated with every passing second. "Mike, you're my friend, and I love you, but you're literally so impatient you were born a

month earlier than your parents expected!"

'Shit, was I really?'

"That doesn't prove anything," Mike responded.

"Oh, yeah?" Will went on. "You remember that time my mom was baking cookies for all of us, but you couldn't wait that long, so you tried to pull them out of the oven early and burnt your hands? And then you still tried to eat the damn things anyway, so you burnt the inside of your mouth, too?"

"Totally worth it."

"What about the time me and Dustin and Lucas were running late to a D&D campaign, so you started the adventure without *any of us there* and somehow got all of our characters eaten by a dragon literally ten minutes in?"

"Hey, you guys wanted to create new characters anyway."

"And then, what about the year you were so excited for Christmas that you covered yourself in coal dust and stayed up all night hiding in the fireplace waiting for Santa Claus, and then threw a fishing net on your parents when they came downstairs to put the presents under the tree?"

"It was an admittedly shitty way to find out Santa doesn't exist."

'Also a shitty way to get grounded and spend the rest of Christmas Break locked in my bedroom.'

"The point is, you're impatient!" Will practically shouted into the phone. "You're like the most impatient person I've ever met! Honestly, based on the way you talk about her alone, I'm surprised you and El haven't already run off and gotten *married* by now!"

'Ooh, that sounds kinda nice.'

"I think that has less to do with patience and more to do with me being a total fucking idiot," Mike finally admitted. "But I get your point. I think. It's just...hard."

"I know," Will said, this time sounding much more sympathetic. "Look, I know it's not the same, but when my dad left...it sucked. A lot. Jonathan saw it coming, but I didn't. And it took me a long time to figure everything out. For a while, I actually thought it was my fault."

"You know that's bullshit, though, right?" Mike cut in, immediately defending his friend. "Like, you know he was a total fucking piece of shit, right?"

"Language, Mike!" Karen shouted from the living room.

"I'm talking about Will's dad!" Mike shouted back.

"Never mind, then," Karen conceded, returning to her book.

"Well, yeah, I know that *now*," Will pointed out, continuing their conversation. "But I didn't at the time. Losing someone is hard. It doesn't matter how or why. I mean, if *my* mom died...I don't know what I'd do. I'd probably shut down completely. So I can't really blame El for zoning out all the time."

"I guess you're right," Mike admitted after a moment's thought.

"Of course I am," Will reminded him. "I'm always right. You guys don't call me Will the Wise for nothing. Just give her time, dude. She'll come around eventually."

And while Mike knew Will was right, it still didn't make him *feel* any better. As much as he knew El was going through a hard time, it didn't change the fact that he missed his best friend. If anything, El being more preoccupied and withdrawn had only further demonstrated to Mike how much he really depended on her on a daily basis. He even had trouble getting his homework done when she wasn't around to encourage him or give him an incentive to finish it early so he could spend more time with her.

The following week of school was thus more of the same: Mike dutifully ate lunch with El and biked her home and watched soap operas with her when Hopper wasn't around, but the wall between them only seemed to grow thicker and thicker still. El buried herself

in schoolwork and books and seemingly any distraction she could find, as though even a single moment's pause would invite a tidal wave of emotions she simply couldn't deal with.

Mike tried to be understanding. He tried to wait. He tried not to push or ask questions or push his luck. In short, he tried to be patient.

Unfortunately, as Will had so convincingly argued, Mike Wheeler was nothing if not *impatient*.

"I don't want to talk about it, Mike," El told him after school on Tuesday the 10th, right after he had finally (and unfortunately) broken his silence and openly asked her what was going through her head.

"Well, when *will* you want to talk about it?" Mike asked, following her down the school hallway and towards the exit.

"I don't know," El answered honestly, frowning as she did so. "Maybe never."

"You can't just *not* talk about it!" Mike told her, frowning just as deeply.

*'Wheeler, just because **you** lack the capacity to **not talk** doesn't mean everyone else does.'*

"Why does it matter to you?" El finally asked, spinning around to face him just as the doors of the school slammed closed behind them.

"Because *you* matter to me!" Mike exclaimed before he knew what he was saying. "Like, I care about you...and stuff. We're friends, El. Aren't we?"

But El just closed her eyes and looked away from him, and Mike felt his heart break a little.

*'Well, congratulations, Wheeler, you did it. You finally ruined **everything**.'*

"Come on," he said softly after what felt like an eternity of silence, gesturing towards the bike rack. "I should get you home."

Evidently, the growing distance between the two was as much visible as it was painful, as Mike noticed several of his peers and classmates watching him and El as they made their way towards the bike rack, many of them with knowing smirks on their faces.

"Trouble in paradise, Wheeler?" shouted one of the many students they passed. "Looks like you better check your woman!"

"Looks like you better check your goddamn *face*, Delfino," Mike shouted back, glaring at the older boy, "because I keep finding your fucking *nose* in my business!"

'Fucking Delfino.'

The bike ride to El's house was awkward that day, and it was the first and only time Mike could remember not enjoying the trip. Usually the feel of El pressed up against him, her arms wrapped around his waist and her head resting comfortably against his back, was more than enough to make up for the extra strength he had to put in to pedaling in order to support their weight. But that day, the bike felt even heavier than usual, and his heart felt like it had sunk into his stomach.

El barely even waited for Mike to come to a full stop in her driveway before she was off the bike and heading for the front door. Normally, Mike would have joined her inside, but it was clear she wanted nothing to do with him, and he watched as she entered the house and slammed the front door closed behind her.

'Take the fucking hint, Wheeler. Just take the fucking hint.'

Mike spent the majority of that night tossing and turning in his bed, unable to sleep, scared to death he had somehow chased off El for good. He glared at the Supercom sitting on his dresser, wanting more than anything to call and talk to her, but at the same time knowing that doing so could only possibly make everything worse.

'I hate this,' he thought to himself as he sighed and turned away from the dresser, instead choosing to stare up at the ceiling. *'I can't call El, I can't call Will in Montauk, I can't do **anything**.'*

Instead, Mike found himself spending the rest of the night thinking about all the good times with El, the times he was so afraid were now past and behind him, and would never again return.

He thought of the first time he had taken El to Melvald's General Store so he could pick up some new (hopefully longer-lasting) batteries for their Supercoms, only to have Mr. Melvald practically chase them out halfway through their shopping trip because he was sick of Mike bleeding all over his nice, clean counters.

*'Like it's somehow **my** fault I'm perpetually bleeding,'* Mike had thought at the time, wiping his bloody nose as Melvald whacked him with his broom and shooed him out the door.

He thought of the days when they would walk or bike together to Benny's Burgers after school, whenever one of them had a few dollars to spare, so they could share a plate of fries or split one of Benny's famous burgers in half. Thankfully, Benny liked them – though, as Mike told El the first time they had gone to the diner, Benny liked *everybody* – so he generally gave them a discount, or even treated them with a scoop or two of ice cream with their meals.

"Please adopt me, Benny, I'll do anything!" Mike would beg him after every meal. "I'm not above debasing myself! Just ask El!"

"Sorry, kid," Benny would respond, ruffling the boy's hair and making El giggle. "I like you, but I don't like you *that* much."

He thought of the 'tour' of Hawkins he had given El just a few weeks into their friendship, biking her around one Saturday morning in order to show her the sights, or at least the sights he found most interesting, which were comparatively few considering his relatively low opinion of the town itself.

He led her through the woods he had affectionately named 'Mirkwood,' even warning her not to go too far lest she end up at Hawkins Lab, where the government was either developing new weapons to use against the Soviets, or testing new brands of cherry lipstick on chimpanzees; Mike honestly couldn't remember which. Afterwards, he took her to the Palace Arcade and showed her how to play several of the games, even experiencing a mild existential crisis

when she ended up beating his high score on *Dig Dug* on her very first try.

'*How the fuck is that even possible?*' he had wondered, flabbergasted and with his jaw hanging open.

He even took her to the quarry, which turned out to be El's absolute favorite, and the two had spent almost an hour just walking around the edge of the giant hole in the ground and looking down into the murky water hundreds of feet below.

"Maybe we can go swimming once it gets warm out again," Mike had suggested at the time.

'*And I'm totally not saying that just because I want to see you in a swimsuit,*' he had thought to himself.

"And I'm totally not saying that just because I want to see you in a swimsuit," he also said out loud because *of course* he did.

'*MOTHERFUCKER.*'

But El had just giggled, as she almost always did when he said something out loud he hadn't meant to. "Maybe. I don't know how to swim. You'll have to teach me."

'*Score!*'

"Sometimes I get little nervous standing this close to the ledge," Mike had admitted shortly thereafter, anxiously peeking down at the surface of the water hundreds of feet below. "I'm always afraid I'm gonna fall or jump off or something."

"I would catch you," El had told him, as though it were as simple as that. "I wouldn't let you fall."

And, for whatever reason, Mike had believed her at the time.

Right then, though, lying in bed and staring at the ceiling with tears in his eyes, Mike wasn't so sure she would be there to rescue him if something like that were to happen. He wasn't even sure she would ever want to see him again at all.

So, imagine Mike's surprise when he left the house to go to school the next morning to find El sitting on his doorstep, her cheeks already red from the chilly December air, indicating she must have walked all the way from her own house.

"El? What are you doing here?" he asked, frowning in confusion.

"Waiting for you," she had said simply before hugging him tightly and burying her face into his chest. It only took Mike a moment before he was wrapping his arms around her and returning the hug, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

'I don't know what the hell is going on anymore, but I like it.'

"I'm sorry for being mean yesterday," El said softly, her face still buried in his chest. "I didn't mean to. You're my friend and I don't want you to hate me."

"I could never hate you, El," Mike responded, squeezing her just a little bit tighter. "And I'm sorry, too, for pushing you. I won't do it again. I promise."

El smiled softly as they pulled back, and Mike could see tears in her eyes once again. "Give me a ride to school?" she asked.

And Mike smiled back. It wasn't like he was going to say no.

Friday, December 13th, 1985.

Mike normally loved Fridays, mostly because Fridays meant the school week was ending and the weekend was about to begin. Friday afternoons and evenings, in particular, were his favorite, as they meant staying up late, watching movies, playing games, hanging out with El, and (holy grail of holy grails) getting to sleep in the next morning. So, considering it was Friday and school was letting out, Mike should have been thrilled.

Unfortunately, Mike was not thrilled. And that was because he was most likely going to be spending his entire Friday evening completing homework.

'It's a goddamn conspiracy, it has to be,' Mike thought to himself as he

packed up his English materials with the rest of his classmates, the echo of the school bell still ringing in his head. *'Why else would every single teacher assign a massive project over the same weekend? A book report in English? A ten-page packet in Algebra? A fucking History essay explaining how bourgeois greed and the failures of a capitalist market economy resulted in the Great Depression? For fuck's sake. And here I thought weekends were for sleeping.'*

"Do you want to go to the quarry?"

Mike looked up with a start as he heard El speak to him, so preoccupied with his floundering weekend plans that he hadn't even noticed her approach. She was standing only a foot away, hugging her books to her chest, and watching him patiently, still expecting an answer.

Things had improved since Wednesday morning, at least between the two of them, but Mike knew El still wasn't feeling better. She hadn't been as short with Mike since they made up, true, and she'd been smiling more often as well. She's even been noticeably closer to him physically, holding his hand more and hugging him just a little more tightly (though she still hadn't kissed him in weeks, which totally *sucked*). Nonetheless, Mike could tell El was still spending most of her time off in her own little world, with little attention to pay to the one she was living in.

'Earth to Wheeler,' he reminded himself, bringing his mind back to reality. *'El's talking to you, asshole, which means you should **probably** acknowledge her!'*

"Sorry, El, I can't," Mike finally said, shaking his head lightly. "I have a metric *ton* of homework I have to get done before Monday. Maybe tomorrow, after I get a chance to get it all started?"

El shrugged, looking disappointed. "Maybe."

*'Oh, shit, she said 'maybe.' 'Maybe' is never good. 'Maybe' is **bad**. 'Maybe' is very, **very** bad.'*

"Um, you know, unless it's like really, really important, and you have to go to the quarry for some reason like *right the fuck now*," Mike

suddenly blurted out, trying to save face as quickly as he could. "Then I'm totally down with that idea. Like, I'm so totally down with that idea that it's goddamn insane. I mean, fuck homework, am I right? Who needs it? I can just fail English and Algebra, I probably don't need to pass those classes to graduate high school, and screw History, I'm pretty sure Mr. Molotov is brainwashing me to become a communist anyway. Either that or I'm falling for all the imperialist propaganda being perpetuated by the corrupt U.S. government. By the way, did you know that the United States is actually a plutocratic regime secretly operated by the wealthiest corporations in the country? Because I sure as hell didn't."

"Mike, it's okay," El cut in before he could keep rambling on, offering him a small (sad) smile in the process. "Your homework is more important. Don't worry about it."

Mike frowned. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," El confirmed with a nod.

"Alright," Mike said hesitantly, still not entirely sure he believed her. "Just give me a minute to finish packing up, and then I'll be right out and we can head home, okay?"

But El shook her head. "My dad's picking me up today. He's probably already here, so...I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"Uh, yeah, sure thing," Mike stammered, watching in confusion (and with more than a little bit of concern) as El turned and began following the rest of their classmates out the room. He had almost finished packing up all of his things (why the hell had he felt the need to unload his *entire backpack* for English class?) when she turned around to look at him one last time.

"Mike?" she asked. "We're friends, right?"

Mike frowned as he looked back up at her. *'What the hell kind of question was that?'*

"Of course we are, El," he said instead, blushing lightly as he said it but refusing to be embarrassed about it. "You're the best friend I've

ever had."

El smiled lightly. "Promise?"

"Promise," Mike responded, offering a small smile of his own.

And with that, she was gone, and Mike was left to wonder what the heck was going on.

A few minutes later, and one quick trip to his locker to retrieve *even more* books for his weekend homework assignments, Mike was finally heading out the school doors and into the parking lot, groaning under the weight of his backpack.

*'I'll be lucky if scoliosis is **all** I get at this rate,'* Mike thought to himself as he practically hobbled over to his bike.

"What's the matter, Wheeler? Having trouble lifting your backpack or something?"

"Not as much trouble as it takes you to lift your fat, fucking ass, Delfino!"

By the time Mike got back home, he was pretty sure his back was permanently bruised from the weight of his backpack, and one his bike tires was almost certainly flat. The trip wasn't even easier without El sitting behind him, as the damn backpack more than made up for her missing weight. Knowing he was probably going to be spending the rest of the weekend working on essays and math problems wasn't exactly a big incentive for him to get home quicker, either.

*'I am **so** not getting any gifts for my teachers for Christmas this year,'* Mike thought to himself as he lugged his backpack up the stairs of his house and towards his bedroom, hearing it thump, thump, thump along every single step. *'Not that I was going to anyway, because I'm not nearly that thoughtful, but...still.'*

Once in his bedroom, Mike immediately got to work, trying to knock out as many of his assignments as he could as quickly as he could. El's words still rang in his head, and if she really wanted to go to the quarry (for some reason), then he was determined to try and make it

happen, even if it meant making her wait until Saturday. And that meant (*gasp*) actually doing his homework.

Shortly after dinner, Mike was heading back up to his room to continue working on his Algebra packet when his mother stopped him.

"Holly and I are going shopping," Karen told her son, already busy trying to persuade Holly to wear her coat. "Since *apparently* the winter coat I got her is 'the ugliest thing she's ever seen.' Did you want to come with us and look for anything?"

*'Gee, do I or do I **not** want to spend my Friday night walking around a crowded shopping mall with my **mother** and my **little sister**? That's a tough one, alright.'*

"Nah, I have a ton of homework to do," Mike said with great regret, though he was clearly not upset in the least. "Besides, I like my clothes. It's not like they have holes or anything."

"No," Karen admitted, pursing her lips slightly, "but you do have a rather nasty habit of getting blood on them. *All* of them. *All* the time."

'Fair enough.'

"I'll be fine," Mike decided. "You two have fun. I'll always have Dad for company."

A few feet away, Ted snored from his spot in the La-Z-Boy, as if confirming this simple fact.

As such, when the phone rang about half an hour later, Karen wasn't there to answer it like she usually was. Assuming (wrongly) that his father would answer the phone, Mike didn't even look up from his Algebra packet. Eventually, the phone stopped ringing; Mike listened carefully, but didn't hear anyone leaving a message.

'Probably just another telemarketer,' Mike figured, shrugging and turning back to his homework. His father had a relatively nasty habit of giving out the family phone number to literally anyone with a Social Security number, so it wouldn't be the first time.

Then the phone began to ring again five minutes later, and Mike realized it probably wasn't a telemarketer. Groaning, he stood up from his desk and poked his head out the door of his bedroom.

"Dad, the phone is ringing!" he shouted towards the bottom of the stairs.

His father's only response was a particularly loud snore.

'Right. Hibernation.'

"Christ, I have to do everything," Mike muttered as he began to make his way downstairs. He glared pointedly at his father as he arrived on the first floor, not that it mattered much; Ted Wheeler was fucking out. With one final roll of his eyes, he answered the phone just before it could ring one last time. "Wheeler residence, Mike speaking, unfortunately."

"Hey, Mike, good of you to pick up this time."

Mike frowned. "Chief Hopper?"

'Oh god, what did I do this time?'

"Yeah, kid, it's me. It's starting to get dark, so I figured I would call and offer to pick Eleanor up so you don't have to bike her over in the cold."

'Wait...what?'

"Uh, sir? I'm confused," Mike told him honestly. "El isn't here."

There was a brief but pregnant pause before the chief spoke again. "Eleanor isn't with you?"

"No, sir," Mike said slowly, suddenly growing very worried. "I haven't seen her since school let out."

"You didn't bike her back home?" Hopper asked, sounding suddenly suspicious.

"She told me you were picking me up," Mike said, his mind suddenly

going a mile a minute as the implications of the situation began to set in. "Did you...are you calling from the station? Maybe she's already home?"

"I've been home for almost an hour," Hopper replied, and Mike could detect the chief's sense of alarm right away. "You swear you're not jerking me around here, kid? This isn't your idea of a prank or anything?"

"What? Of course not!" Mike exclaimed, almost offended. "I know I can be a fucking idiot sometimes, chief, but I'm not a total *asshole*. I honestly thought she was with you."

"Christ," Hopper muttered so softly Mike almost couldn't hear him over the phone. "This isn't good. Did she say anything to you before she left school? Anything out of the ordinary?"

Mike thought about it.

"Mike? We're friends, right?"

"My dad's picking me up today. He's probably already here, so...I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"Your homework is more important. Don't worry about it."

"Do you want to go to the quarry?"

Mike's eyes suddenly widened. "The quarry."

"What was that?" Hopper asked over the phone, Mike having spoken so softly he couldn't even hear him. "Mike? Mike, did you say something? Mike?!"

But Mike couldn't hear him, as he had already dropped the phone and was on his way outside before he even realized what he was doing, leaving the receiver dangling behind him. Faster than he had ever moved in his entire life – faster than he had pedaled El to Homecoming, faster than he had run from the entire football team during Freshman Beatdown Week – Mike threw his jacket on, shoved his feet into his shoes, and was then out the door.

The houses of Maple Street and the adjoining neighborhoods were little more than blurs as Mike passed them by on his bike, pedaling faster than he could ever remember pedaling. The sun was beginning to set over the horizon, and he could already see the purple tints of twilight beginning to encroach on the borders of the previous blue sky.

'I'm such a fucking idiot,' Mike berated himself as he jumped the curb and began heading towards the path through the woods that he knew would take him to the quarry. *'I **promised** I would never let her feel alone again. I fucking **promised** that. And the one time she fucking needs me to be there for her, I bail because I have fucking **homework**? God **damn** it, Wheeler!'*

It only took a few more minutes before he found the path through the woods and he crossed the street over to it as quickly as he could, ignoring the cars honking and beeping at him as he cut them off.

'If anything has happened to her, I'll never forgive myself,' Mike pledged. *'And that's a promise I won't have **any** trouble keeping.'*

The ride through the woods felt entirely too long for Mike, though he knew it couldn't have been more than a few minutes, especially at the rate he was pedaling at. Unfortunately, his speed also meant he was paying less attention to his surroundings than he probably should have been, meaning he found himself caught completely off guard when the front tire of his bike struck a stray root.

'Oh, boy, here we go.'

Less than a second later, the bike flipped over and Mike was thrown from his seat and onto the gravel ground below, which wouldn't have been *too* bad had he not landed directly on his *face*, because *of course* he did. The fact that his bike somehow managed to land *on top* of him didn't help matters, either, especially when the impact forced his face back into the dirt a second time in as many seconds.

'Hello, darkness, my old friend...'

Despite the fact that literally every inch of his body was screaming in pain, and it was taking pretty much everything he had in him not to

start bawling like a goddamn infant, Mike slowly managed to push himself off the ground, shrugging his bike off his back in the process.

'Torn shirt? Check,' he thought to himself as he began to examine himself with practiced ease. *'Scraped elbows? Check. Scraped knees? Check. Split lip? Check. Bloody nose? Ooh, both nostrils this time. Check. Hmm...sprained ankle?'*

"FUCK!"

'Check.'

And, while he couldn't tell without a mirror or any other kind of reflective surface, the throbbing pain in his face informed Mike that he had most likely given himself yet another black eye, at the very least.

'Christ, I probably haven't looked this bad since Troy kicked my ass on the first day of school,' Mike thought to himself. *'It will be like El is meeting me all over again.'*

Mike's eyes suddenly widened as he remembered why he was even on his bike and in the woods in the first place.

'El! Shit!'

He was back up on his feet in no time, not without a fair bit of struggle thanks to his (almost certainly) sprained ankle, and was just about to jump back on his bike when he noticed, lo and behold, the front tire of the bike was busted beyond his limited ability to repair.

'Fuck it, I don't have time for this!' Mike decided, leaving the bike behind and continuing his half-run/half-limp journey through the woods and towards the quarry as fast as he could hobble. *'It's not like anyone's gonna steal a broken bike anyway.'*

It only took another two minutes or so to make it out of the woods, but it still felt like an eternity to Mike, his knees and elbows aching as they were and his nose bleeding like there was no tomorrow. Finally, *finally*, he found himself on the wide dirt road that spanned the circumference of the quarry, the same way he had brought El all those weeks ago, and within another minute, he could see the ledge

of the quarry itself.

And that's when he saw her.

El, alone, standing on the ledge of a large rock overlooking the quarry, and looking for all the world like she was about to jump.

'Oh my god,' Mike immediately thought, his face paling with apprehension. *'She's gonna jump. El's gonna fucking kill herself.'*

Time seemed to slow down for Mike, and suddenly nothing else mattered except for the girl standing on the ledge of the quarry less than fifty feet in front of him. He didn't care about the dozens of cuts and bruises and sprains he was sporting, or the busted bike he had left behind in the woods, or the fact that he hadn't told anyone (not even El's father) where he was. None of it mattered.

'El's going to commit suicide,' he realized with horror, watching as her form was illuminated by the gentle glow of the setting sun and the helpless part of his mind took control. *'She's in so much pain that she's going to end it all. She was reaching out to me, reaching out for **help**, and I fucking **failed** her. Now she's going to kill herself and there's nothing I can do to stop her.'*

And then, just as Mike was about to give in to despair, he felt the rebellious part of his mind make its triumphant reappearance. The part of his mind that had always told him to laugh rather than cry, to talk shit rather than just get hit. The part of his mind that never seemed to know when to shut the fuck up, no matter how badly he wanted to or needed to, even when his own survival was at stake. The part of his mind that made him Michael 'Loudmouth' Wheeler.

*'Fuck **that**.'*

So, ignoring the pain in his ankle/eye/knees/elbows/everywhere, Mike walked a little closer to El until he was only about twenty or so feet away and, taking a deep breath, did the one thing he was best at: he shouted. He shouted louder than he had ever shouted anything before, his voice echoing off the granite walls of the quarry. He shouted so loudly that his fucking throat hurt and he could already feel his lungs burning for air.

"EL!"

El spun around in response, clearly startled, evidently not having heard Mike's approach. She frowned in confusion upon finding Mike standing so close behind her, and even in the dim light of the setting sun, Mike could tell she had been crying.

'I must have gotten here just in time,' he thought.

"Mike?" El asked, not taking a single step away from the ledge.

Mike took a deep breath. *'Well, here goes nothing.'*

"Don't jump, El," he said softly, but loud enough that she could hear, slowly making his way towards her and being careful not to make any sudden movements. "Please don't jump. Don't do this. I know it hurts. I swear to god, I know it hurts, it must hurt so goddamn much, but you can't do this. You can't. I...I won't let you. I *can't* let you. Do you understand?"

El just blinked, sniffing lightly. She didn't say anything, but continued to stare at him, fresh tears in her eyes. She looked at Mike as though she was guilty; as though she knew what she was doing was wrong and was ashamed he had arrived to witness it.

But she still didn't step away from the ledge.

"Please, El, I swear to god I know how it feels," Mike added, wiping the blood from his face as he did so. "It's why I'm always fucking talking and making jokes and acting like such a goddamn weirdo. I don't *want* to be like this, I don't *try* to be, but I can't *help* it, El. I have to. It's the only way I know to hide how much everything always hurts. It's the only way to hide the pain, to hide how goddamn insecure I feel about *everything* all the time. I have to laugh! I have to talk! I have to, because if I don't...then I'll never stop crying, El. It's all I'll ever be able to do, and it's only going to make it hurt so much worse, and I can't deal with that!"

'Yeah, great tactic, Wheeler, make it all about you.'

"I feel like this *all the time*, El," he admitted. "Literally, all the time. Ever since I moved to Hawkins, I've been alone. That's what it's felt

like. I left everything back in Montauk. My friends, my life... everything. And since then, it's only ever been *shit*. I get beat up at school on a regular basis and no one bats a fucking eye. My mom and dad never talk to each other because they know if they do, they'll only end up fighting. It's been like this for *years*, and I had *no one* to turn to for any of it. No one. Not Will or Lucas or Dustin or Max, who all have their own lives to live. Not Nancy, who fucking abandoned me as soon as she graduated. No one. At least...not until *you*."

'Oh, great, and here come the waterworks.'

"You changed everything, El," Mike went on, doing his best to ignore the tears welling up in his eyes and beginning to stream down his bloodied and dirtied cheeks. "You...you saved me. Do you understand? You saved me! You're the only person in this entire fucking town who ever cared about me. You could have left me bleeding on the ground that first day of school, but you *didn't*. You helped me. You helped me, and you talked to me, and you were there for me. You're my friend, the first friend I've had in years, the best friend I've *ever* had. When I'm with you, I don't feel alone anymore. When I'm with you, I feel...loved."

'Whoa, whoa, whoa, slow down there, cowboy, let's not get carried away...'

"I'm in love with you, El."

'Goddamn it.'

"I think I've been in love with you since the day we met," he continued, speaking through the tears and trying to ignore the way El's eyes widened in surprise upon his declaration of love. "I love you so fucking much, El. I know I'm an idiot, and I'm really sorry it's taken me so fucking long to admit it, and I'm really, really, *really* sorry if you don't feel the same way about me, but it's true, and I can't keep fucking ignoring it anymore. I'm so goddamn in love with you that it literally fucking *hurts* when you aren't around. And I know we've only known each other for a few months, and I'm a goddamn moron, and this is probably at least 30% hormones talking right now, but I swear to god I only ever want to be with you, El. More than anything, anything I've ever wanted, I just want *you*."

*'No, please, by all means, Wheeler, keep going. It's not like you can lay it on any **thicker**.'*

"And...and I don't care how awful my life is so long as you're still a part of it," he told her. "Even if you don't love me the way I love you, even if you don't want to be friends anymore, I won't be angry at you. Not a single fucking bit. Even if you totally hate me now and want nothing to do with me and want to limit our daily interaction to you spitting on me in the school hallway, I'll fucking *take* it, El, so long as you're still a part of my life. Because I will always be here for you. I promise, El, I swear to god, for you, I will *always* be here. Just, please, El, please...don't jump. Just please don't fucking jump."

'Please.'

By the time he was finished, Mike was out of breath and he could feel his scraped knees wobbling, as if trying and on the verge of failing to keep him standing upright. He could barely even see El (or anything else) through all the tears in his eyes, and he knew from the trouble he was experiencing breathing through his nose that he had to be one big teary, snotty, bloody mess.

*'Yeah, gee, who **wouldn't** want to date me?'*

It felt like an eternity passed before Mike saw El respond by taking a single step forward, towards him and away from the ledge of the quarry.

Then another.

And another. And another.

And then she was in front of him and throwing her arms around him and he was wrapping his arms around her and they were hugging and crying and it didn't *matter* what Mike looked like or how El felt about him because she was in his arms and away from the ledge and fucking *alive*.

"Thank you, Mike," she sobbed into his shirt, clutching him close as though he were the sole life preserver in the middle of an ocean she found herself forever drowning within. "Thank you."

Mike couldn't even respond at first, so glad he was to have El in his arms, to feel her crying into his shirt, to have her pressed against him and *safe*. He just held her and cried as she held him and cried, and time passed, but neither of them noticed or cared.

"I can't lose you, El," Mike said when he next found himself able to. "I just can't."

"You won't lose me," El responded softly, sniffing as she spoke.

"Promise?" Mike asked, tightening his grip on her.

"Promise," El answered.

The sun had finally set by the time Mike felt the last of his tears escape, and he sniffed lightly without letting go of the girl in his arms, instead only squeezing her harder still. He could feel her gentle breathing against him, her eyes closing as she nuzzled her face into his chest, and he finally felt the strength to speak again.

"Thank you," he said softly, practically talking into her ear. "Thank you for not jumping. I'll help you, I swear to god, I'll do whatever I can for you. I...I don't know what I would do without you."

"Mike..." El spoke up after a brief pause, her voice still soft and barely more than a whisper, "I was never going to jump."

Mike froze. Somewhere, a record scratched.

'*Wait...what?!*' Mike thought. '*She **wasn't** going to jump?!*'

"You *weren't* going to jump?!" he also said out loud, pulling away just far enough that he could look down at her with eyes as wide as dinner plates.

'*You're never gonna stop doing that, are you?*'

El shook her head, blushing shyly, as though she knew how embarrassing this had to be for Mike. "I...was feeling sad, about Mama, so I came here. It's quiet. And pretty. I asked if you wanted to come, but you had homework."

Mike could already feel his (blackening) right eye beginning to twitch involuntarily.

'Wheeler, you goddamn idiot.'

"But...but if you weren't going to jump..." he began to say, gears turning in his head, "then that means...I didn't need to tell you any of that stuff I just told you. Like, all that shit about how crappy my life is and how I never shut up because of how much it hurts and how I'm, like, madly in love with you and probably have been since the first day I met you. I didn't have to tell you *any* of that."

El just shrugged, smiling shyly all the while.

*'Congratulations, Wheeler, you just pulled the most dramatic stunt of your entire goddamn life and spilled your guts to the girl you love...all because you failed a fucking **spot check** and immediately jumped to the worst possible conclusion. You really are a fucking piece of work.'*

"Was it true?" El finally asked, successfully pulling Mike back out of his head.

"Um...was what true?" Mike replied, already feeling his cheeks grow hot and his heart pound in his chest as El looked up at him and waited for his answer.

"What you said, was it true?" she asked softly, her voice barely above a whisper, her own cheeks turning a bright red. "Are you really...in love with me?"

Mike felt like his heart stopped as he looked down at the girl in his arms, the girl with curly brown hair, the girl with the beautiful autumn fire eyes that burned with an intensity unlike anything Mike had ever before felt or witnessed in his entire life, and suddenly he felt like he was viewing her for the very first time again, half-conscious and looking up at her from the bloodied ground of the schoolyard.

The quarry, the twilight sky, the entire fucking town of Hawkins, everything else seemed to fade away into nothingness. Mike no longer felt the pain throbbing in every muscle of his body, no longer

worried about his mother or father or Hopper or where they thought he and El were, no longer seemed to care about the fact that he was probably about ten minutes away from passing out entirely. None of it seemed to matter anymore.

All that mattered was the girl standing in front of him. The girl who always helped him. The girl who made him brave. The girl who drove away his loneliness, who cared about him, who loved him for who he is, who inspired him to be the best he could be and more.

Eleanor Hopper.

El.

His El.

And she wanted to know if he was really in love with her?

'God, yes.'

"God, yes."

El beamed at him, the first true smile he had seen from her since her mother's passing, and Mike knew right away that she was going to kiss him. A moment later, that's what they did, their eyes closing slowly as they moved towards one another, their mouths opening just enough to accommodate the lips of the other.

Like every kiss Mike had ever experienced with El, this one felt utterly and completely unique, like it was the first time he had ever *truly* kissed her, as if all previous kisses had been trial runs or practice rounds, while *this...*this just *had* to be the real thing. There was simply no other possible option.

'*I love this girl so fucking much,*' Mike thought to himself as he put everything he had into the kiss, almost as if he was afraid El would disappear if he stopped. '*This is all I want. This is all I **ever** want. Fuck school, fuck college, fuck **breathing**, **this** is all I want.*'

He felt El shiver with pleasure in his arms, which only caused him to pull her closer and squeeze her tighter still, as though he would never be satisfied until they had somehow merged into one gross, lovesick

being. He was so happy he felt like he could sweep El off her feet and twirl her around like one of the actors in the soap operas she loved so much.

*'Maybe I can try that sometime when I **don't** have a sprained ankle,'* he thought to himself.

Finally – though still far too soon for Mike's taste – the two of them had to break away, their lungs on fire and in desperate need of fresh air. Their foreheads pressed against one another as they looked at each other, and Mike didn't think he had ever seen El look more beautiful than she did right then and there, with tears still gleaming at the edges of her eyes and her curly brown hair glowing gently against the purple twilight sky behind her.

'Despite all evidence to the contrary...I might just be the luckiest guy in the entire fucking world.'

"So, um..." he began, suddenly shy all over again, his cheeks growing redder and redder by the second, were such a thing even possible, "does this mean we're, like...dating now? For real?"

'Smooth as ever, asshole.'

But El just giggled, as she always did when he thought he had embarrassed himself.

"Dating for real," she confirmed, still shyly standing on her toes to kiss him again, lighter and softer this time. "I love you, Mike."

"And I love you, El," Mike replied, surprised at how easily he found himself saying it and loving the way his heart fluttered in his chest when he saw her smile in response. "God, I love you so fucking much."

She tightened her arms around him as she nuzzled into his chest, joyful tears staining the fabric of his shirt, not that he gave a single shit. He just hugged her right back and laid his head atop hers, closing his eyes and letting himself feel her heart beat against his, her chest rise and fall as her breath steadied and all the drama and tension and anxiety both of them had been feeling was finally

released in one fell swoop.

Neither knew for how long they stood there between the woods and the quarry, holding one another, but twilight was already giving way to night by the time they finally separated, smiling at each other shyly but comfortably. Mike knew things were going to change from here on out, probably a lot of things, but that was okay; life was all about change, and so long as El was with him every step of the way, he would be able to handle it.

'Well, Wheeler, your life might suck harder than a black hole,' he considered with a small smile, going so far as to brush aside some of El's curly hair and causing her to giggle shyly, *'but you got the girl, so how fucking awful can it really be?'*

"Come on," he said softly, taking her hand in his and squeezing it gently. "Let's go home so your dad can murder us and hide our bodies in the quarry."

"Mouth-breather," El said with a small laugh, smiling as she squeezed back. "Lead the way."

'Still totally worth it,' Mike thought to himself as the two of them began heading back into the woods and towards the town, together, hand-in-hand. *'She always will be.'*

A/N: And they lived happily ever after, until Hopper killed them both.

I would like to once again thank absolutely everyone who has read and commented and reviewed this story; your feedback was essential to me, and helped inspire me to keep going right up to the very end. I hope this finale was everything you wanted it to be and more.

And for all those sad or upset about this being the last chapter, have no fear: an Epilogue is already in the works. See you then!

9. Epilogue: El Outdoes Her Boyfriend

A/N: Here it is: the much-anticipated epilogue.

I've loved writing this story, and I have especially loved all the positive feedback you guys have been providing me with since this story started. I know you're sad to see the story end (so am I!) for real this time, but I would always prefer to finish while I'm ahead and at the top of my game.

So, since this is an epilogue, and not *technically* part of the main story, here's something completely different: a chapter from (mostly) El's perspective!

Monday, June 23rd, 1986.

El yawned as she woke, the last vestiges of sleep finally beginning to fade away into nothingness. She was warm, she realized immediately, very warm, and not just because of the summer heat or the sunlight streaming in through her bedroom window. She opened her eyes, blinking wildly in the process, and then smiled as she looked down to find the source of her extra heat was lying directly beneath her.

Mike Wheeler.

The teenage boy was sprawled out across her mattress as if his life depended on him reaching all four corners of the bed simultaneously, his black hair was a complete and utter mess, and he was somehow both snoring *and* drooling. And yet, El thought to herself as she looked him over, he didn't look any less handsome for it, at least not to her. She had fallen asleep half-beside him and half-above him, cuddled up to his side and practically wrapped around his torso.

Summer vacation was in full-swing, and El found that she *loved* it. As much as she enjoyed going to school and learning new things, she found she *also* enjoyed staying up late, sleeping in, and spending extended amounts of (uninterrupted) time with Mike. School had only been out for a week, but she and Mike had already taken full advantage of their time together to hang at the arcade and hike through the woods and try to find increasingly elaborate ways to stay

cool.

("We went to the quarry today," El had told Hopper one evening over dinner after Mike had gone home for the night. "We stayed in the shallow water. Mike is teaching me to swim.")

"Yeah?" Hopper had asked, genuinely interested. "And how's that going?"

"Good, I think," El had told him after a moment of thought. "It involves a lot of kissing so far."

"I'll bet it does," Hopper had grumbled.)

The two had even stayed up together the evening before, with El inviting Mike over upon learning Hopper would be pulling another all-nighter at the station. Despite the lateness of the hour, the night had been almost as warm as the preceding day, and so Mike had elected to go to sleep without a shirt on, leaving him in only sweatpants, which El was absolutely perfectly okay with. She even envied him for it a little; it wasn't like *she* could go to bed without a shirt on, at least not while he was around, so she had been forced to settle for a pair of pajama shorts and a tank-top. So, there he was, in all his shirtless, snoring, drooling glory.

Her Mike. Her boy.

'*My boyfriend*,' El thought to herself, loving the little shiver of delight that ran down her spine every time she heard, spoke, or thought the word. There was just something about *saying* it that made her happy, that made her feel all warm and fuzzy inside, even after six months of being together. It just sounded so...*right* to her.

El had learned fairly early on, from both television as well as firsthand accounts, that high school relationships seemingly weren't supposed to last long. She had seen it again and again at school; boys and girls shouting at each other and breaking up and refusing to talk to each other for days or weeks or even months at a time. Such things had always confused her; did they not love each other? Otherwise, why had they gotten together in the first place? It simply didn't make any sense. She couldn't imagine ever being mad enough at Mike to

yell at him in public, much less 'break up' with him.

Not that she and Mike hadn't had their arguments and disagreements; they were teenagers, after all, raging hormones and all, but even then, their disputes were always short-lived and tame when compared to those of their more 'mature' classmates. Besides, according to Mike, most of their arguments were less over personality differences or teenage drama and more about his determination to survive to his next birthday.

("Just a little longer?" El would ask, frustrated, clutching his shirt and pulling him closer. "I like kissing you. I want more.")

"I like kissing you, too, El, I like it so fucking much," Mike would respond, cheeks flush and eyes wide with a mixture of attraction and fear. "But I also like *being alive*, and if we kiss any longer, your father is going to magically appear behind me and shove a police baton so far up my ass I'm gonna choke to death on it! Hey, stop laughing! This is serious!")

Regardless, the two of them always managed to make it up to the other as soon as possible, so it was rare their fights ever lasted more than a few hours or a single night. Indeed, most mornings after an argument involved El waking up to find Mike on her doorstep either (literally) begging for her forgiveness or offering some kind of thoughtful gift, like specially made Eggos, or tickets to a movie she wanted to see, or (to Hopper's eternal frustration) an entire litter of puppies.

("But Dad, they're so cute!" El had protested as they drove the yipping little fuzzballs back to their original home to return them.

"I don't care if they're the cutest goddamn things on the entire planet, we are *not* adopting six dogs," Hopper had argued, doing his best to drive the car and prevent one of the puppies from peeing on his lap. "You hear that, Wheeler? Never again!"

"I swear to god, I only meant to get four!" Mike had responded, completely missing the point. "The last two just kinda followed!")

'*Not just my boyfriend,*' El thought now as she smiled down at the boy

beneath her, his snoring finally dying down to a dull roar. '*The best boyfriend.*'

She was just about to lie back down on his chest and let his heartbeat lull her back to sleep when she turned to look at her doorway on a whim, only to find her father standing there and leaning on the doorframe, watching her with a raised eyebrow and a very disapproving look on his face.

'*Shit,*' El thought to herself with a frown. '*Not again.*'

"Please don't kill Mike," she said without thinking, unconsciously tightening her grip on the shirtless boy snoring next to her, as if to protect him. Hopper merely rolled his eyes.

"You need to stop asking that," he told her as he quietly made his way into her room, being careful not to wake Mike while doing so. "And you *really* need to stop doing this. I'm tired of having a goddamn heart attack every time I walk into your room."

El frowned. "But you said he could spend the night."

"I said he could stay over," Hopper pointed out. "I didn't say he could sleep in your bed. Especially half-naked."

'*Fair enough.*'

"No funny business," she said in response, blushing lightly as Hopper look at her with yet another raised eyebrow. "We were good. We're not stupid. No grandchildren yet."

"Thank god for that," Hopper said with a roll of his eyes. "Anyway, it's time you two got up. Just got the call, they're on their way. Should be here in no time."

El's eyes widened. She had almost forgotten!

"Mike! Mike, wake up!" she whispered loudly as she sat up and begin shaking Mike's shoulder, Hopper watching on all the while. "Come on, Mike!"

"Uhhnnn," Mike groaned as he finally began to respond, groggily

wiping his mouth of drool and turning over a little. "What time is it...?"

"Time to get up," El said with a smile, loving how cute her boyfriend looked whenever he was just waking up. It only took another couple of seconds for Mike to finally open his eyes and look up at her, a goofy smile quickly consuming his features.

'Pretty,' El thought to herself, feeling her own cheeks turn red at his grin.

"Good morning, beautiful," Mike said, still only half-awake and grinning his goofy grin as he looked at the girl sitting above him. "I wish I could wake up to you every day."

"Ahem," Hopper coughed a few feet away, alerting Mike to his presence and causing the young man's eyes to widen to comically large proportions as he turned to face the chief.

"Um...and you, too, of course, sir," Mike stammered, trying (and failing) to smile naturally.

"Any particular reason you're sleeping in my daughter's bed without a shirt on?" Hopper said instead, not even bothering to contribute to Mike's shenanigans.

El had to bite back a laugh as Mike seemed to remember all at once where he was and what he was (or rather, was *not*) wearing while in the chief's presence. His eyes widened even further than before, were it possible, and it almost looked like he was about to suffer an aneurysm.

"Sorry, sir, it was hot last night!" Mike said defensively, reaching up with both hands to cover his chest as if the sight of his nipples would offend Hopper. "Like, really hot! Unbearably hot!"

Hopper simply blinked at him. "Hot, huh? With my daughter?"

Mike's face paled so quickly El could almost hear all of the blood flow straight out of his head and into his feet.

"Oh, sweet holy mother of Buddha Above, no, not like that, never like

that!" Mike stammered, practically oozing fear. "When I say hot, I mean *hot*! Like, temperature hot! Not like sexy hot, like *hot* hot! Not that El isn't sexy, she's way sexy, totally the sexiest, but I would never, ever, *ever* say something like that, especially not to you, because you're her father, and that would be sad and awkward and no one would like that, and I would probably have to kill myself just to ensure I don't die of humiliation first. Uh...sir."

By the time he was finished, El was already giggling furiously and practically falling against him in laughter, much to Mike's chagrin. Hopper similarly offered a small smile in return, shaking his head nonetheless, as though he couldn't believe *this* is what his life had become.

'*Poor Mike*,' El thought to herself as she looked over at him, still smiling. '*But funny*.'

"You're never gonna get tired of scaring me, are you?" Mike asked with a groan, shoulders slumping as he realized for the four millionth time that Hopper wasn't actually going to eviscerate him.

"Sorry, kid, but you're just too much fun," Hopper said, still grinning. "Now come on, we got places to be."

"We do?" Mike asked, confused. "Why?"

"Because it's your birthday!" El answered excitedly, utterly incapable of holding it in for even a second longer. "Happy Birthday, Mike!"

El had been looking forward to Mike's birthday ever since her own, having promised herself that she would find some way to outdo the charm bracelet Mike had gotten her, the one she had worn pretty much every single day since receiving. As such, she had been planning his present for several months now, bit by bit, piece by piece, until, by this point, she was probably more excited for Mike's birthday than he was.

Which was made all the more apparent when Mike just frowned in response to her exclamation. "Wait, what? It's my birthday? Really?"

"Jesus," Hopper grumbled with a roll of his eyes. "The kid doesn't

even know his own birthday."

"What's today? The 23rd?" Mike asked, still looking very much confused. "Oh, shit, I guess it is my birthday, huh? Cool! I'm officially fifteen! That means I can be legally denied a Learner's Permit! I know I'm what I'm doing this week!"

"How didn't you know it was your birthday?" El asked with a frown of her own, just as confused as he was, albeit for an entirely different reason. "I thought you knew it was coming up. We just celebrated Holly's birthday last month, remember?"

"Well, yeah, but Holly is like...important," Mike answered with a shrug.

'Well, you're important to me, mouth-breather,' El thought to herself, still frowning.

"Right, well, I still need to take a shower, so I'm trusting you two to get up and get dressed – *separately* – and be ready to leave in half an hour," Hooper said as he looked back and forth between them both. "We clear?"

"Yessir, sir!" Mike said, immediately saluting and immediately regretting it. "Um...where are we going, again?"

"Ask El," Hopper said as he began heading out of the room with a small smile on his face. "She's the one who planned it all."

El couldn't help but blush lightly and allow a small smile to curl her lips as Mike turned away from Hopper and instead looked at her with an expression that El knew meant Mike suspecting her of being up to something.

'To be fair, he isn't wrong,' she realized.

"Planned *what*?" Mike finally asked, narrowing his eyes so he was practically glaring at his girlfriend.

"Your birthday present," El answered simply as she stood up and stretched lightly, as though it was any other day and she wasn't waking up next to the boy of her dreams.

"You got me a birthday present?" Mike repeated questioningly. His eyes widened, as though the very idea of someone getting him a present was completely and utterly foreign to him. "Like, an actual birthday present? Like the kind my parents are supposed to get me but inevitably forget to get me? You didn't have to do that."

"You're my boyfriend," El pointed out, once again experiencing that small shiver of delight. "Of course I did."

"What is it?" Mike asked, still not getting out of bed.

But El just smirked. "You'll see. And hurry up. We have to go."

"Nope!" Mike answered with a mischievous smirk of his own, suddenly bundling himself up into the sheets and covers. "I'm not leaving this bed until you tell me what you got me for my birthday! Or your dad murders me and cuts my body up into tiny little pieces to feast on later. Whichever comes first, I guess."

'You're lucky you're cute, Mike Wheeler,' El thought to herself as she pouted angrily, *'because we do **not** have time for this.'*

"It's a surprise, Mike!" she said instead, already running out of patience as she grabbed his arm and tried to pull him out of bed. "Now, get up!"

"Tell me what my present is and I'll get right up!" Mike argued, laughing as he struggled. "But until then...nope! Nada! No can do!"

"Come on, Mike, this isn't funny," El protested, pulling his arm with both of hers, only to make no progress whatsoever.

"El, I love you," Mike told her, still smiling his shit-eating grin, "but the only way you can get me up is if you tell me what you got me for my birthday!"

'Oh, is that so?'

"I can *make* you get up," El told him, grinning mischievously as she finally let go of his arm.

"Yeah?" Mike asked, blushing suddenly, his mind clearly diving into

the gutter right away.

"Yeah," El said as she slowly sat back down on the bed and scooted closer to Mike. "I can."

"How's that?" Mike asked, swallowing audibly, his cheeks growing redder and redder as El drew ever closer.

But El just smiled as she crawled towards him and onto his lap, lifting herself up until she was practically straddling him with one leg on either side of his waist. She placed her hands on his shoulders, shivering at the feel of his bare skin beneath her fingers, and looked down into his brown eyes with her own, biting her lip in anticipation.

"Let me show you," she finally said, before leaning in and kissing him. A second later, he was kissing her back, and all was right with the world.

El knew this was far from the only way to get Mike out of bed, and it was almost certainly the quickest way to make her father angry, but she didn't really care right then and there, with Mike kissing her with just as much intensity as she was putting in. She sighed into the kiss as she felt Mike slowly wrap his arms around her and pull her closer until she was practically sitting in his lap. She tightened her grip on his shoulders as she felt herself pulled up against him, and reveled in the feel of his bare chest, immediately craving for more.

They finally parted after what felt like far too short a time, but El gave Mike only enough time to catch his breath before her lips were once again crashing against his, his surprised gasp only further encouraging her. She wanted, *needed* more of him, and she was determined to have him.

'*Well, it **has** been eight hours since we last kissed,*' El thought to herself as she slowly moved her hands up Mike's chest and into his messy black hair, as if holding him in place so he couldn't again break away from their kiss. '*It's a wonder I'm still alive!*'

El didn't know how long she spent kissing Mike, feeling his lips pressed against hers and his arms around her back, but eventually she had to pull back, completely out of breath as she was. She opened her

eyes and smiled upon finding Mike looking right back up at her with eyes wide and cheeks red and yet another goofy look on his face, as though he could spend the entire day kissing her and be perfectly happy with it.

'Sounds like a plan to me,' El thought to herself, biting her swollen lip. *'But not today.'*

"God, you're incredible," Mike said softly, looking at her like he always did after they kissed, like she was an angel sent from heaven, a goddess on earth, the most perfect being in all the universe. "I love you so fucking much."

"Love you, too," El responded just as softly, shivering in pleasure as she bent down for one last quick kiss. "Get up now? Please?"

Mike nodded, his face still as red as a tomato. "Yes, ma'am."

With that, Mike finally allowed El to pull him out of bed. A moment later, he was gathering up some of the clothes he had brought over last night (having realized he would probably be spending the night at her place one way or another) so he could go change in the neighboring bathroom. El gave him one final kiss before kicking him out of her bedroom so she could likewise get dressed.

'I think I like kissing Mike when he's shirtless,' she thought to herself, blushing lightly as she changed out of her nightclothes. *'I think I like it a lot.'*

She pulled on a simple pair of jean shorts and, after a moment of looking around, finally settled on the black Metallica T-shirt lying on the floor that Mike had worn over the night before. It was much too big on her, falling almost to the bottom of her shorts, but that was okay; it looked good, and it smelled like Mike, which she very much appreciated.

"Hey, isn't that my shirt?" Mike asked her when she finally stepped out of her bedroom to find he had changed into a clean polo shirt and a fresh pair of jeans.

(El had noticed fairly early on that Mike refused to wear shorts of

pretty much any kind, no matter how high the temperature rose. When she asked him about this, he had insisted it was because he was sensitive about the scars on his knees but, having finally gotten a look at his legs while they were swimming in the quarry a few days ago, El was now fairly certain he was actually insecure about the fact that they were as naturally smooth and hairless as hers after she shaved.)

"Maybe," El said with a smile and shrug.

"Well...it looks really good on you," Mike told her with another blush as they headed down the stairs together. "Not that anything else wouldn't look good on you, because it would, because everything looks on you, or, rather, you would look good in anything! Because you're so gorgeous and beautiful and downright perfect that you could make anything look good, whether or not it's mine! But, um... yeah. You really like wearing my clothes, huh?"

"I like explaining how I got them off you more," El answered slyly, laughing triumphantly when his eyes widened and he seemingly began to choke on nothing at all.

"Don't do that!" he hissed as they reached the first floor, blushing madly and looking back and forth wildly, as though afraid they were being followed. "You never know when your dad might be listening!"

"Listening to what?" Hopper asked as he calmly walked into the foyer.

"JESUS!" Mike shouted, immediately losing his cool and falling on his ass with a loud and painful *thud*. "Don't do that!"

"Don't do what? Walk in my own house?" Hopper asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes! Sir!"

'I love this boy,' El thought as she reached down to help him get up. *'Probably a little too much. But, oh well.'*

"Alright, kids, time to get a move on," Hopper said, grabbing his car keys and heading for the front door. "Don't want to keep them

waiting."

"Them? Who's them?" Mike asked as El pulled him back to his feet.

But El only shook her head. "You'll see."

"Gah!"

A few minutes later, all three of them were in Hopper's Blazer, with El electing to sit with Mike in the back seat. As Hopper turned the car on, El pulled a blindfold out of her pocket and offered it to Mike, who stared at her as if she had grown a second head.

"Put it on," she told him with a smile.

"I really don't want to."

"I can make you."

"You might have to."

Making sure her father wasn't looking directly at them, El leaned in and kissed Mike, capturing his lips with hers and sighing contentedly as she felt him shiver in pleasure...before taking advantage of his momentary surprise to slip the blindfold over his eyes.

"There!" she said triumphantly, tightening the blindfold as Mike's cheeks turned red once again. "Easy."

"Fantastic," Hopper commented dryly as he turned around and began to back the Blazer out of the driveway and into the street. "Now can we try not to kiss each other while in the car? For my sake?"

"No promises," Mike said, blindfolded though he was. "Sir."

As it turned out, Mike might as well have made the promise anyway, since the drive was remarkably short and, before he knew it, the car was being put back into park and El was unbuckling his seatbelt for him.

"Wait, that was it?" Mike asked as he let El take him by the hand and lead him out of the car, managing only to bang his forehead on the

roof of the doorway on the way out. "Ow! Son of a bitch!"

"Sorry!" El apologized, helping him out of the car before gently kissing the bruise that was slowly appearing on his forehead.

"It's okay," Mike mumbled, rubbing the bump on his noggin absentmindedly. "At least it's not my nose for once."

El smiled. *'Even on his birthday, Mike can't catch a break.'*

"Alright, cover his ears," Hopper said somewhere in the distance, still utterly unseen by Mike. "I'll get them out here."

"Get *who* out *where*?!" Mike exclaimed just as El covered his ears with her hands. "El, please tell me you aren't about to throw me into a pool of flesh-eating piranha. Whatever I did to deserve this, I swear to god, I am so sorry!"

"Quiet," El told him as she kissed his cheek and smiled as he turned a brilliant shade of scarlet. "No piranhas. Just wait."

Mike knew he could only have been standing in the dark for a minute or two at most, but it felt like *hours* considering he didn't know where he was, he didn't know what he was doing, and he didn't know who or what was about to happen. He could already feel his fingers begin to tap against his hips impatiently, hoping against hope that this wasn't some elaborate plot to kill him.

Finally, *finally*, after what seemed like centuries of waiting, Mike felt El pull her hands away from his ears, and instead reach down to take one of his hands in hers.

"Alright, everybody," he heard Hopper say from somewhere out in the darkness. "On three."

"What's on three?" Mike asked, frowning and looking around, as if that would somehow allow him to see through the blindfold. "Is it my execution by firing squad?"

"One! Two!"

'He's going to be so happy,' El thought to herself as she reached up to

take hold of Mike's blindfold in preparation. *'I just hope he doesn't faint.'*

"Three!"

At once, El yanked the blindfold off Mike's eyes and then took a step away to allow him to view the sight before him, already feeling a smile curling the edges of her lips as she saw his jaw drop open and his eyes widen in surprise.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MIKE!"

Mike blinked wildly, as if he couldn't believe his eyes. Was he dreaming? Was he high? Had he died and gone to heaven? All of those options seemed more realistic than the situation he now found himself in but, manic hallucination or not, it didn't stop his heart from skipping a dozen beats as he found himself standing on his own front lawn and looking upon half a dozen people he thought he would never see again.

His sister, Nancy.

Will.

Lucas.

Dustin.

Max.

Will's brother, Jonathan.

The Party. The *whole* Party. Here, in Hawkins, standing in front of *his* house, on *his* front lawn.

'I must have hit my head harder than I thought,' Mike pondered.

"You...but...how...?" he stammered, looking back and forth between their smiling faces as though he was about to go into some kind of shock. He blinked wildly before turning to El as he felt her take his hand in her own and squeeze reassuringly. *"How?"*

"I might have convinced your sister to drive your friends from Montauk here for a visit," El admitted shyly, but smiling all the while. "Happy Birthday, Mike."

Upon hearing this, Mike finally smiled. "I love you."

And then he fucking fainted.

"Uuuugh," Mike groaned as he finally began to come to, wondering where he was and why it felt like his brain was bouncing around in his head. He blinked a few times as he slowly opened his eyes, trying to disperse the darkness as best he could. His vision finally began to return, little by little, and he found himself staring up at a familiar face.

El.

"El?" he asked weakly, squinting as the sunlight hit him in the face. The bed felt *really* hard and uncomfortable this morning for some reason. "What happened? I had the *weirdest* fucking dream that I woke up in your bed and your dad totally *didn't* kill me, which really should have tipped me off that it was a dream right away, but it turned out it was my birthday so you and your dad blindfolded me and drove me to my house because you somehow managed to invite, like, the entire fucking Party from Montauk. Like, *everybody*: Will, Lucas, Dustin, Max, even Jonathan and Nancy, and I literally thought Nancy was on a safari in Narnia or some shit, but she was totally there, and so was everyone else, and it was like the most amazing birthday gift ever! Also, we totally made out in your bedroom, and it was awesome, but don't tell your dad or he totally *will* kill me, like, for real this time."

El blushed. "Um..."

"What?" Mike asked with a frown.

He finally sat upright to find he was *not*, in fact, lying in bed, but actually on his own driveway, surrounded not only by El (who was crouching worriedly beside him with a guilty look on her face) but by Hopper, Nancy, Jonathan, and the rest of the Party members he was certain he had only been dreaming about until half a second prior.

All of them were standing around him with varying looks of concern on their faces, and it only took another second or two before Mike realized what had happened.

He groaned. "I wasn't dreaming, was I?"

"Definitely not dreaming," Lucas answered with a shit-eating grin.

"I actually fainted, didn't I?"

"You kinda did," Will replied with a sympathetic look.

"And I totally landed on my face, didn't I?"

"Totally," Max said, trying and failing to hold in her own laughter.

"And my fucking nose is bleeding *again*, isn't it?"

"Just like old times," Dustin sighed reminiscently. "Some things never change."

'*Poor Mike*,' El thought to herself for the fortieth time that day, knowing it wouldn't be the last, but smiling all the same.

"This is the last time I ever do anything nice for you, Wheeler," Hopper said from a few feet away, busily lighting up a cigarette as he leaned against the side of his Blazer. He gestured towards Will, Lucas, Dustin, and Max impatiently. "Now would you kids hug him, or something? It's hot out here and I want to get inside already."

So, that's just what they did. One second, Mike was wiping the blood from his face, the next he felt four pairs of arms being thrown around him all at once as his friends – his *friends* – practically buried him beneath their weight. Were it any other occasion or with any other people, Mike might have felt claustrophobic, or anxious, or even just downright confused, but these were his friends, friends he had had for years, friends he honestly thought he was never going to see ever again, and so all Mike felt right then and there was a kind of radiant joy.

"I missed you guys so much," Mike mumbled as he tried his best to hug back all four of them at once, trying (and failing) to fight back

tears. He couldn't even move with all four of them hugging him at once, not that he much minded.

"We missed you, too, Mike," Will said softly, and Mike knew without looking that there were tears in his eyes, too.

"We talked about you pretty much every day," Lucas went on.

"Montauk hasn't been the same without you, Wheels," Max added with a smile.

"Yeah, Madmax can't DM worth shit," Dustin noted, nodding sagely, which only earned him a smack in the face from said person. "Ow! Fuck off, Mayfield!"

All of them, including El, who was standing on the outskirts of the group and smiling as she watched her boyfriend interact with his old friends, suddenly pulled back and looked up when they heard a passing sports car honk its horn to get their attention. The car was full of older teenagers, and at least one of them clearly knew Mike.

"Hey, look, guys!" said the driver of said car as they slowly cruised by the Wheeler residence. "Wheeler finally managed to find some friends as lame as he is!"

"Hey, you hear that noise?" Mike shouted back almost immediately. "That's the sound of nobody giving a fuck what you think, Delfino!"

"That's fucking hurtful, Wheeler!"

"Your fucking *face* is hurtful, Delfino!"

"Who the hell was that?" Max asked as the car drove off and Hopper began chuckling to himself, evidently amused by the ongoing feud.

"Just fucking Delfino," Mike answered, as if that explained everything, shaking his head as his friends finally began to pull back and help him get back up on his own feet. "But never mind that! What is this? How are you all here?"

"El told you right before you fainted, remember?" Nancy said as she pushed her way through the other Party members to pull her little

brother into a hug. "Mom gave her my number at NYU a few months ago and we've been setting everything up since then. It took a while to convince everyone's parents, but here we are. You get to put up with us for two whole days before Jonathan has to take everyone back."

Mike turned to his girlfriend, who was standing just outside of the group of them, watching with a small smile on her face. "El? *This* is my birthday present?"

"I know how badly you missed your friends," she told, blushing lightly at his goofy grin. "I wanted to make you happy."

"Have you met them all yet?" Mike asked, to which she shook her head. "Then come on!"

A moment later, Mike had El by the hand and he was introducing her to all of his friends one at a time with all the enthusiasm of a man introducing the Queen of England to various lowborn peasants, and it made El blush a little to see him so overwhelmingly excited.

"Okay, guys, so this is El," Mike told his friends, pulling her over by the hand and smiling so widely it looked like his face was about to crack in half. "She's my girlfriend because she's the smartest, sweetest, kindest, strongest, cutest, most awesome, and most beautiful girl in the entire world and, *for some fucking reason*, is in complete denial about the fact that she is *so far* out of my league that it's goddamn ridiculous. She was the first friend I ever made here in Hawkins – kinda wish it hadn't taken three whole years – and she's totally the best friend I've ever had, like, ever. Sorry, Will. Sorry, Lucas. No offense."

"None taken," said Lucas.

"*Some* taken," said Will.

"I'm not out of your league," El told Mike, shoving him softly before kissing him on the cheek and nuzzling into his neck affectionately. "You *are* my league."

"Son of a bitch, she is just *adorable*!" Dustin exclaimed, pushing the

others aside so he could reach out and shake El's hand. "Greetings, good lady, Dustin Henderson at your service. It is a genuine pleasure to finally meet you."

"Yeah, so this is Dustin," Mike began, glaring at the boy in the hat all the while, as if suspecting him of being up to something. "He's our Bard, and probably the only other person in the entire world who *might* talk as much as I do. But he mostly just pulls pranks on people, so if he tries anything, feel free to punch him in the stomach. We all do it. Just don't hit him in the mouth because – holy shit, you have *teeth*!"

"What?" El and Dustin both said at the exact same time, both with the exact same amount of confusion.

"Teeth!" Mike exclaimed, rudely shoving his fingers right into Dustin's mouth. "You have fucking *teeth*!"

"Oh, you like these pearls?" Dustin asked with a smile, before purring loudly and immediately causing both Mike and El to withdraw in horror. "No?"

"God, no," Mike answered, with El shaking her head next to him. Leaving Dustin laughing, he then took El and turned towards Lucas, who was standing next to them. "Right, this is Lucas, our Ranger. We used to live next door back on Montauk and I've known him since, like, forever. He's the one who first came up with the Supercom idea. Oh, and he's got a little sister named Erica who, if you're lucky, you'll never have to meet."

"I wish *I* was that lucky," Lucas agreed as he reached out to shake El's hand politely. "Nice to meet you, El. Any friend of Mike's is a friend of ours."

"Nice to meet you, too," El said with a small smile. "Is your sister really that bad?"

"You ever heard of Satan?" Lucas asked. "They're related."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"And this is Max, our Rogue," Mike said, introducing El to the red-haired girl standing next to Lucas. "She moved to Montauk just a couple of years before I moved and –

" – And I'm by far the most awesome member of this entire pack of losers," Max finished for him, taking El's hand and shaking it with a smirk. "Thanks, Wheeler, but I can introduce myself. And I'm a *Zoomer*, by the way, not a Rogue. Basically, I'm Maxine Mayfield, but everyone calls me Madmax because I'm so much better than them at everything."

"Everything?" El asked, hers growing wide in awe.

"Video games, biking, natural beauty, the whole nine yards," Max confirmed, whipping her red hair back as if to demonstrate. "That's actually how I met them. I found them crying after I beat all their high scores at the arcade."

"We weren't *crying*," Lucas clarified with a glare. "We were in a state of shock. It's different."

"And I'm Will," Will said, walking up to El and taking her hand in his. "It's nice to finally meet you. Mike does nothing but talk about how awesome you are anymore. He was totally in love with you the moment you guys met."

"Really?" El asked, her eyes lighting up as she turned to look at her boyfriend.

"I told you that in confidence, *Cleric*," Mike hissed as he leaned in close to Will, which only made Will laugh.

"And I'm *confident* I'm right," Will said with his own mischievous smile. "I've known Mike since preschool. I probably know him better than he knows himself. And I'm really glad he has you to make him happy now."

"Thank you," El said shyly. "He makes me happy, too."

"You better be happy, Mike, because we drove for almost twelve hours straight yesterday," Jonathan added as he came up behind his brother and shook both Mike's and El's hands in quick succession.

"This is my brother, Jonathan," Will said, introducing him to El.

"It's nice to meet you," Jonathan said, smiling at El and then nodding as he noticed her Metallica shirt. "And it's nice to see you have good taste in music."

"Thanks, they're my favorite," El said with a smile. "I like it when Mike sings their songs."

"You sing now?" Will asked Mike, eyebrows raising as he looked over at his friend.

Mike just blushed and glared right back. "Not another word, Byers."

"Yeah, Will, we don't want them kicking us out already after all that driving," Jonathan joked. "I like you, Mike, but I don't know if I like you enough to do that trip all over again. You're lucky I'm dating your sister."

Cute yet another record scratch.

"Wait...you're doing *what*?" Mike asked, turned back to his sister, eyes wide with surprise. "Nancy? You and...and Jonathan? You guys are *dating* now? Like, hiding the salami and everything? You used to say he was just Will's dorky older brother!"

"We got reacquainted when we both ended up going to NYU," Nancy answered, smacking her brother on the shoulder slightly. "And I never said he was dorky."

'So, *that's* where you've been all this time,' Mike thought to himself, along with the thought that he *really* should have known that all along.

"Is anyone *else* dating that I should be aware of?" Mike asked in exasperation, looking back over at his friends.

"Well, actually..." Lucas began as he reached over and took Max's hand in his own, both of them laughing immediately as they saw Mike's eyes widen and his jaw drop open.

"Get the fuck outta here!"

"No, it's true," Max assured him.

"No, I mean, really, you both should get the fuck outta this state," Mike said, suddenly sincerely worried for them both. "Like, I know it's the Eighties and everything, and I love you guys, but this is fucking *Indiana*, and I'm pretty sure our population is, like, at least 40% racist redneck assholes."

"He's not wrong," Hopper confirmed from the Blazer, taking another drag of his cigarette.

Mike turned to look at Will and Dustin, the two of them now standing next to each other, and glared at them suspiciously. "And you guys aren't...?"

"Pft!" Will answered with a roll of his eyes. "Dustin *wishes*."

"Fuck off, Byers," Dustin responded, punching Will in the shoulder.

His mind still reeling, Mike finally looked away from his friends and family and instead looked at his girlfriend, who was standing there next to him, hand in his, looking only a little overwhelmed by all the new introductions, and he smiled.

"You did this?" he asked her again. "You called my sister and convinced all of my friends to drive down here, to fucking *Hawkins* of all places, just for my birthday? You did *all* of this? For me?"

El nodded.

"But...*why*?" Mike asked, as if he couldn't for the life of him figure out why *anyone* would go to such lengths for him, of all people.

But El just giggled. "Because I love you."

To which Mike just smiled his goofy, sappy smile. "El, you're amazing."

"And you're a mouth-breather," El told him before leaning in to kiss him.

Mike heard the laughing and whooping of his friends the moment El's

lips met his own, but he found he didn't much care. It didn't matter that his friends were jeering loudly, or that Nancy and Jonathan were both sticking their tongues out in mock disgust, or that Hopper was clearly watching them with narrowed eyes by the Blazer, or that Holly and his mother were probably waiting inside the house for the whole group to finally come in and have some cake and ice cream already, damn it. It didn't matter because El was kissing him, and she was *his*, he was *hers*, and she was the most amazing girlfriend in the entire world and Mike couldn't possibly imagine being this in love with absolutely anyone else in his entire life.

'I am so goddamn in love with this girl,' Mike thought to himself as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in for another soul-searing kiss, which she responded to almost instantaneously. *'You know what? I'm gonna twirl her around like I said I would when we first got together. I'm gonna fucking do it. What's the worst that could happen?'*

The worst that could happen, as it turned out, was that Mike could successfully sprain his ankle for the second time in six months, which he managed to do before he completed even the first twirl. Pretty much the moment El's feet left the ground, Mike's ankle twisted in *just* the wrong way, and he ended up falling to the ground for the second time in ten minutes.

"FUCK!" he shouted as he landed on his back, having *at least* managed to make sure El fell on top of him and not the other way around.

'At least I didn't faint this time,' he thought as he did his level best to ignore the loud laughter of his supposed 'friends.'

"You okay?" he asked El as she lay on top of him. She nodded, her cheeks glowing red as she tried to catch her breath. "Promise?"

"Promise," she responded, sitting up and getting off him before her father got the wrong idea and decided to come over and strangle them both.

"Smooth as ever, Wheeler," Max commented, still laughing as she helped El get off the ground.

Dustin was laughing so hard he appeared to have fallen, too, and was

clutching his stomach as he literally rolled around in laughter. "Oh my god! Oh my god! I...I can't...I can't even..."

"Jesus Christ, Mike," Nancy said as she took her brother by the arm and helped him back onto his feet. "Sometimes I am literally embarrassed to be related to you."

"You're embarrassed to be related to *me*?" Mike asked incredulously. "Have you even *met* Dad?"

"Okay, that's enough shenanigans for now," Hopper cut in, finally putting out his cigarette and heading over to where the mess of teenagers were crowded around in the front lawn. "You guys have two whole days to catch up. Let's get inside before Mrs. Wheeler eats all the cake herself. I helped put this thing together and, damn it, I'm gonna get some ice cream for it or there'll be hell to pay."

"Ice cream?" Dustin asked, head suddenly shooting up and laughter dissipating almost immediately. "You didn't say there was ice cream! Last one inside is a rotten Demogorgon egg!"

"Does the Demogorgon even lay eggs?" Will asked as Dustin shot up and bolted towards the front door of the home, his hunger evidently taking full control of his limbic system. Lucas and Max simply shrugged before taking off after Dustin, with Will following shortly.

"I love you so much," Mike said to El, reaching out to take her hand as they made their way across the lawn and towards the front door along with everybody else. "You're the absolute greatest. I just...I thought you should know."

"I do know," El said with a small smile, leaning in to nuzzle him once again. "And love you, too."

What followed was a day that El would remember for the rest of her life, not only because she *totally* outdid her boyfriend in coming up with the best birthday present possible, but also because it was one of the first times El got to have fun with other kids her age who *weren't* Mike. Though she had only met the other members of the Party that morning, a part of El felt like she had known them her entire life, and their laughter and comfort around each other was positively

infectious. She bonded with Will, laughed with Dustin, shook her head in exasperation with Lucas, and spent more than her fair share of time making fun of the boys with Max.

The entire point of the visit was to reunite Mike with his old friends. Instead, El found herself with four brand new ones.

'Best birthday ever,' El thought to herself at one point. *'And it isn't even mine!'*

They ate pizza and cake and ice cream. They watched *Star Wars* movies. They played Truth or Dare. They taught Holly four new words, none of which Karen was particularly pleased to hear. They even managed to at least *begin* a new *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign, the first one Mike had been a part of in over four years, and El swore she saw tears in his eyes as he temporarily resumed his role as Dungeon Master.

As such, several hours passed by the time the day's festivities began to die down. Hopper left shortly after dinner, Ted having promised him he would keep an eye on his daughter overnight before promptly falling asleep in the living room. Karen and Holly proceeded to go to bed around ten, with Nancy and Jonathan doing the same an hour later, leaving the six fifteen-year-olds in the basement to continue their campaign.

Just as it were approaching midnight, however, exhausted by the events of the day or otherwise still tired from the thirteen hours of driving they had experienced in the last two days or so, even the members of the Party started to drop like flies. Will was the first to go, literally falling asleep at the D&D table before the others carried him into a neighboring loveseat. He was followed shortly by Lucas and Max, who fell asleep holding hands on the couch, at least until Dustin plopped down in between them.

"What the hell, dude?" Lucas had asked groggily, withdrawing his hand out from under Dustin's ass.

"Someone's gotta keep an eye on you two lovebirds," Dustin told them before yawning loudly and then stretching his arms out so they were wrapped around both Lucas and Max. "Can't have any caramel babies

running around yet. Now come here and keep ol' Uncle Dustin company."

"I swear you get weirder every fucking year," Max commented, grimacing slightly but not actually struggling.

This just left Mike and El, a fact neither of them was particularly bothered about, and the two soon elected to cuddle up together beneath the blanket fort Holly had built for them a few months back, having decided the two of them needed a 'home' of their own if they were going to be dating. Mike lay down on his back and El cuddled up next to him, wrapping her arms around his torso and snuggling her head into his chest as he wrapped his own arm around her. It was a position the two had mastered over their time together.

'*Pretty*,' El thought to herself as she looked up at the boy with the four thousand freckles and the messy black hair and the permanents stains of dried blood around his nostrils. '*Very pretty*.'

"Thanks again," Mike whispered to El, shaking her out of her thoughts as he leaned down to kiss her curly hair. "For this. For the Party. For everything. I literally never thought I was going to see any of them ever again. But you...you did it. Just like you always do. You're the best."

"So, you liked your present?" El asked, smiling up at him softly, already fully aware of what the answer was going to be.

"Like it? I fucking love it!" Mike told her, smiling right back. "This has been the greatest birthday I've ever had, in my entire goddamn life! I mean, I know that isn't saying a lot, considering how lame most of my past birthdays have been and how pathetic my entire life is just in general, but...still. Definitely the best birthday present ever. And it's all thanks to you."

With that, Mike leaned down and captured El's lips in yet another kiss, the first he had initiated the entire day, considering he had been surrounded by friends and family literally since the moment he woke up that morning. But now they were alone (or as alone as two teenagers could be in a basement while surrounded by four other sleeping teenagers) and that meant there was no one to laugh at them

or glare daggers at them or call them cute.

And frankly, El thought as she kissed Mike back with everything she had, she rather liked it better when Mike was the one to kiss *her*. There was something about him taking the initiative, about him openly displaying his love for her without any sort of trigger or stimulus or go-ahead, that sent a shiver of delight running down her spine.

So, a moment later, when the two finally drew apart, El knew her face was on fire and she was shyly biting her lip as she looked up at the boy she loved with everything she had, and she knew he was looking back down at her feeling the exact same way.

"I love you so much, El Hopper," he said softly and honestly, his dark eyes dancing in the dim lighting of the basement.

"I love you even more, Mike Wheeler," she responded just as softly, giggling lightly as he rolled his eyes in exasperation. Taking his hand, she looked down at the numbers on his watch.

'11:51 PM'

'*Now or never*,' she thought to herself. '*So it has to be now!*'

Smirking mischievously, she withdrew her arms from around Mike's torso and then slowly climbed on top of him until she was literally straddling his waist, enjoying the conflicted looks of confusion and anticipation battling for dominance over his face.

"El? What are you doing?" Mike practically whispered, his cheeks burning red as he looked around the basement, as though to remind her they were surrounded by their slumbering friends.

"It's still your birthday for a few more minutes," El told him, blushing just as deeply as her boyfriend. "So I wanted to give you one last present."

"What's that?" Mike asked, suddenly wary without knowing why.

Summoning the last of her courage, El leaned down over Mike so her face was hovering only inches above his own. She felt Mike gasp as

she moved, his breath suddenly becoming short and stilted as he felt her practically lying on top of him. They looked into each other's eyes, their lips only centimeters apart, and El knew right away that she had him in the palm of her hand.

"You still want your shirt back?" she finally asked.

Mike gulped. "Y-Yeah?"

El smiled and kissed him chastely on the lips before pulling back away. "Then take it off me."

There was a long pause before Mike spoke again, and when he did, it was with a voice so full of love and want and *need* that it made El shiver in pleasure.

"Fucking marry me."

A/N: Thanks again, everybody. I literally couldn't have done it without your kudos and comments and reviews to keep me going. When I started this story, I literally only intended for it to be a super-long oneshot. It was your overwhelmingly positive feedback and support that convinced me to turn it into a series, and I'm so goddamn glad I did. It's taken a lot of time and a lot of energy, but I've had a blast, and I don't regret a thing.

Here's hoping at least some of you will stick around for more Mileven oneshots in the near future. Until then, I hope you enjoyed the life and times of Mike 'Loudmouth' Wheeler, and I bid you all a very fond farewell!